

## module one: customer service

### Greetings and First Impressions

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#### article:

### Is My Body Language Showing?

Speak it and read it. It is universal.

by Laurie Guest

Factor in body language when it comes to making a first impression. Before you open your mouth to speak, you have already delivered a message. The words you speak, intertwined with your body language, communicate whether you are approachable or unapproachable and so much more.

My experience in learning body language started when I was about 19 years old and working in health care. I had a habit of folding my arms over my mid-section and leaning against door jams or registration desks with a hip out and a little bit of attitude out too. I was standing like that one day when the doctor I was working with walked up, pointed to my folded arms, and said, “Knock off the attitude!” I clearly remember responding, “What attitude?” with complete attitude all over my face. She handed me a book on body language and told me it was mandatory reading, complete with a book report. I rolled my eyes and made that sound in my throat that says, “This is stupid.” She noted, “You will find those behaviors on page 52.”

I took the book home against my will, and it’s one of the five books that changed the course of my life. I had no idea that I was reeking in body language. Everything I thought was written all over my face all the time. What’s scarier, sometimes what I wasn’t thinking was written all over my face. Consequently, my face and I were easily misunderstood. As soon as I learned how to change my body language, it made a difference in the rapport that I built, not only with the doctor but with the patients as well.



After studying my own body language, I learned how to change several key things. First, I adopted an open stance when engaging with people. That means arms not crossed, but rather down at my sides or loosely bent at elbows with fingertips touching. Instead of leaning on things, which causes one hip to protrude out giving a cue of boredom, I trained myself to stand up straight with both feet firmly planted and weight equally distributed. Most importantly, however, I concentrated on eye contact and smiling. Maintaining eye contact doesn’t mean staring at a person to the point of awkwardness. It means looking right at the person you are speaking to rather than over his/her shoulder or down at your feet. A smile doesn’t have to be so big your cheeks hurt. A slight upturn of the corners so your mouth leaves the neutral position is enough. Interestingly, a mouth in neutral position actually looks like attitude. A slight upturn makes all the difference.

Once I made these subtle changes, I noticed my ability to connect with our customers and with my coworkers improved. Now as a speaker meeting hundreds of new people each month, I am amazed at how strong the signal can be from those who have not studied the consequence of bad body language. I recently gave a series of presentations to a group of health care providers. They rotated through the meeting room in groups of 50. Some came with positive attitudes and body language that made me want to engage with the team and learn more about them. Others came with a silent signal of the opposite. Even though every person walking through that door was a stranger to me, my feelings toward them were not universal. After one of the sessions, I commented to the executive, who was monitoring the class, that I had a few individuals with a lot of attitude in one session. He pointed to the section where a group of three had been sitting. “Was it the staff in the back right corner?” When I confirmed that it was, he said, “Yes, we have a lot of problems with that crew. In fact, it is because of them we are having this training.” Wow, I can’t imagine how embarrassed I would be if I found out an entire medical complex was having mandatory training because of my poor behavior. I truly believe that if your job includes contact with the customer, positive body language contributes to the success of your career more than anything else.

Learning how to improve body language will impact your customer service. Concentrate on eye contact and smiling because it is key to body language. Body language influences a customer’s perspective of your business from the first moment of contact. Keeping posture open and welcoming, rather than bored or busy, makes an impact.

Remember, not only should you think about the body language you speak, you also need to read the body language of the customer. For example, in retail, body language tells you to back off and give the customer some space. Take notice of this and follow up with the right words like, “Hey, let me give you some time to browse. Just wave at me if I can be of help.” What about the opposite of that: the customer that needs our attention immediately? Think about the body language of restaurant guests when they’re in a rush. Picking up on that and leaving the check right after the plate is placed would meet their needs. Say something like, “I thought you might be in a hurry, so here’s your check right away. I’ll swing back in a little bit to see if you’d like anything else.” A happy diner will likely be a repeat customer.

Being a pro at body language comes with being aware and paying attention to the tells. Small movements and gestures give you clues into what a person thinks. Regardless of your business, apply the principles of non-verbal cues. It will be an impactful contributing factor to your overall success.