

# The Silent Signals

Good verbal skills and technical knowledge are essential to effective presentations. But alone they are not enough.

By KATHLEEN A. BISHOP

**D**o not be deceived. Communicating, a seemingly simple task, is one of the most difficult things we do. Yet we spend 85 percent of our day doing it.

Many times, the messages we send are not the ones received. When this happens during a presentation, the results can be disastrous.

The nonverbal aspects of speech delivery are the tricky ones. They are subtle and hard to identify, but if they are not identified and handled properly, they can destroy a presentation. These nonverbal aspects arise from your attitude, self-image, self-confidence and enthusiasm. They play a great part in the way the audience sees and reacts to you. It's not what you say that's important, it's what people *believe* you say. If words project one image and emotions another, an audience believes what the emotions reveal and ignores the words.

## Pretty unsure of yourself?

Examine your self-image. Do you see yourself as smart, pretty, handsome, important, special? Or do you think your intelligence, looks and personality are just so-so? If you fit the second description, it's time you took a good look at yourself and reevaluated your potential. For most people, self-image depends solely on self-perception, which translates into a correlation between body image and self-worth.

Audiences have one common and canny aspect: They can read you like a book. They can spot your feelings of insecurity and lack of confidence the minute you enter the room or open your mouth to speak.

What are the signals that give you away? One is your personal appearance—a reflection of how you feel about yourself. If you bite your nails, have unkempt hair and wear clothing that looks tired,

unpressed and ill-fitting, you can be sure that you appear to have a poor self-image. Nervous gestures such as pacing, shifting, darting your eyes and clasping your hands tightly also reveal your self-image. They are dead giveaways that you're not sure of yourself, your qualifications or your topic.

Improve the way you look outside, and you'll improve the way you feel inside. People around you will offer compliments and praise, and you'll begin to feel good about yourself. By improving your self-image, you will improve your chances for success. By showing your audience—not only through personal appearance, but also by choice of words, enthusiasm and willingness to improve—that you really like yourself, you'll convince them to listen to what you have to say.

Always dress up to or above your audience, never below them. Even if your entire audience is in blue jeans and polo shirts, you should be in business attire. Show them that you're a professional, there to do a professional's job.

Self-confidence is another trait that affects presentations. Being self-confident allows you to be poised and secure even in the most trying situations. Actions, attitudes and personal appearance reveal your self-confidence.

By speaking loudly and clearly, standing tall and sticking to your guns when you know you are right, your self-confidence shines through. Know your subject insideout. This enables you to speak with confidence. Use as few notes as possible; this tells your audience you are an expert in your field and brings credence to your words. It also lets your audience know that you are speaking by design and not default.

## Attitude

Are you a pessimist? Do you think life is really a drag? Do you think the world owes you a living? Is everyone out to get you? If you answer "yes" to any of these questions, step back and take a good look at your attitude.

A poor attitude is reflected in your speech. It affects your tone of voice, your

body language and your facial expressions. You jeopardize your credibility with a poor attitude. Regardless of the validity or value of your information, it will be interpreted by many as false or insignificant.

If you want to improve your attitude, think positively. Before you go into a meeting or stand up before a group, give yourself a pep talk. Statements such as "I feel great"; "I really love my job!"; "This audience is wonderful!" repeated frequently will affect your attitude for the better. As you walk on stage, take a deep breath and put a smile on your face. Then begin your speech. A smile is catchy; it's like the common cold—once given away it's easy to get back.

## Ho hum

Emerson said, "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm." Enthusiasm shows in your presentation through your voice, facial expressions, posture and eye contact. It can't be hidden if you have it, and its absence stands out like a sore thumb.

Enthusiasm comes from within. It takes a lot of energy to propel it and keep up the momentum. But it can mean the difference between a good speech and a great one. Enthusiasm can be encouraged by reciting the positive affirmations mentioned before. Also, speak about things you are interested in and knowledgeable about. Add humor and anecdotes to your speech, especially when you feel your enthusiasm declining or your audience getting bored and slipping away. Tell a rousing tale of heroism or a fabulous success story. Just telling the story should replenish your enthusiasm. Keep smiling. Be energetic in your body language and hand gestures, elevate your voice and change its pitch and tone.

By combining all of these techniques you'll keep up the excitement level in your presentation. In doing so you will retain your audience's attention and gain their respect. Even if they don't agree with your thoughts, they will not deny your sincere enjoyment in speaking to them.

Start thinking about—and rehearsing for—your next presentation now. Make sure your body language and words are in agreement. They must project the same image, or your message won't be received as planned.

*Kathleen A. Bishop is a partner in Bishop, Neill & Associates, a communications consulting firm in Davie, Fla.*