

5 Keys to Great Nonverbal Communication

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Clear and effective communication is essential during presentations, whether for board rooms full of executives, auditoriums at conferences, or classrooms full of students.

Verbal information is vital, but how we present that information can determine how much an audience remembers. Researchers Allan and Barbara Pease found that 83 percent of communication is nonverbal, but I wanted to know what impact it had on audience recall.

I conducted an experiment with four identical university classes with a total of 80 students. Each class had a guest speaker who presented. Two of those presenters used effective nonverbal communication, while the others used poor nonverbal communication.

The interesting part was that this was more of an acting gig than a teaching gig. Each presentation was exactly the same, word for word. The PowerPoint was the same, and the presentation length was the same. The only difference was a few nonverbal tactics.

Nonverbal communication includes a number of elements, so I manipulated only five elements:

- 1. Eye contact.** The effective nonverbal instructor tried to make eye contact with each student throughout the presentation; the poor nonverbal instructor looked at the PowerPoint and minimally glanced at the students.
 - 2. Voice fluctuation.** The effective nonverbal instructor varied his vocal pattern throughout the presentation; the poor nonverbal instructor kept a moderately monotonous vocal range.
 - 3. Position in the room.** The effective nonverbal instructor used a PowerPoint clicker and walked around the front of the room; the poor nonverbal instructor stood behind a podium and used the desktop computer mouse to navigate the PowerPoint.
 - 4. Facial expressions.** The effective nonverbal instructor used a variety of enthusiastic facial expressions; the poor nonverbal instructor kept a moderately flat expression.
 - 5. Hand gestures.** The effective nonverbal instructor continually showed the palms of his hands during gestures; the poor nonverbal instructor kept his hands on the surface of the podium.
- Following the presentation, each class took the same test, which questioned them about the information they were just given. The effective nonverbal communication courses scored almost 30 percent higher on the test than students in the poor nonverbal communication courses.

Students had interesting things to say about their experience during a focus group following the lectures:

Effective nonverbal communication class:

- “If he didn’t look like he knows what he’s talking about, then I wouldn’t trust him or listen to him.”
- “(Presenters’) body language in general can definitely tell you a lot about their knowledge about the subject.”
- “Sometimes when (presenters) are speaking, I just won’t pay attention because I am bored, but I paid attention to this one.”

Poor nonverbal communication class:

- “He just had random facts. I just didn’t really know where he got those from.”
- “I got distracted easily with doodling on my paper. I listened to the first half, but I don’t remember anything from the second half.”

- “I agree. I kind of wandered off. I tried focusing on the PowerPoint, but that was bad, too.”

So, next time you're offering a presentation for a client or at a conference, remember you're saying just as much with your body as you are with your mouth.

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