

# Body Language in Customer Service

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The bulk of customer service training concerns what we *say* to customers, emphasising the rehearsal of scripts, sales pitches and language to maximise the chance of a positive customer experience. But this is only half the story, as body language and non-verbal communication play a crucial role in customer service as well. It's often not *what* you say, but *how* it's said that has the most impact and the greatest lasting effect on a customer. In this track, we'll discuss how you can use better body language to improve your ability to deal with customers face-to-face in this uniquely challenging industry and why it's so important to take non-verbal communication into account.

Let's begin with a fundamental piece of scientific research in this area. The "7-38-55 rule" was conceived in the 1960s by leading psychologist Professor Albert Mehrabian, who established in a landmark [study](#) that our choice of words, tone of voice and body language account for 7%, 38% and 55% of personal communication, respectively. This is a surprising reminder that our non-verbal cues are usually more valuable and influential than our verbal ones. Therefore, to be effective and persuasive in our verbal communication, it's essential to complement our words with appropriate body language and the right tone of voice.

It's often stated that the eyes are "the windows to the soul". Eye contact is extremely powerful. [Research](#) has shown that good eye contact activates the 'limbic mirror system' in the brain. This means that the same neurons which fire in someone else's brain will also fire in yours when you share eye contact with them. For instance, if their eyes are communicating the emotion of 'joy', neurons in your brain will also fire to feel joy. This sharing of emotional states can help people more easily form bonds, as well as increase their empathy.

This goes some way towards explaining why eye contact is so important in customer service. It lets a customer know that you're *actively listening* to their needs and taking them seriously. By maintaining eye contact with customers throughout an interaction, you're sending a continuous message that you're paying attention and are *completely* focused on finding a solution for them. The reverse of this – for example, looking down before answering a question, repeatedly glancing away as your customer speaks and blinking excessively – can instead trigger a negative reaction and cause them to feel uncomfortable or frustrated that they're not being *heard*. One way to easily improve your eye contact skills is to try noticing the eye colour of each customer you interact with. This simple trick will encourage you to look them in the eye, signalling your openness and interest in the process.

It seems obvious, but you should *always* look for opportunities to smile in the presence of a customer. It conveys that you're happy to help and gives a sense of optimism about doing so. Having an appearance that suggests a pessimistic or uninterested attitude will only serve to let the customer know that your attention is elsewhere and *not* focused on solving their problem. Research on this “service with a smile” phenomenon is very convincing. One [study](#) demonstrated that the bigger the employee's smile, the more likely customers were to view that person as competent and their encounter with them as satisfying. Smiling is *infectious*, as it radiates out to customers and often induces them to smile back. This maximises the chance of a positive interaction, and has the potential to leave a lasting impression which resonates long after the customer has concluded their shop. Bear in mind that sometimes it's not price or convenience that encourages customers to shop at a particular place; it's the overall *experience*. That's why according to an international [survey](#), 73% of all people listed customer experience as an important factor in their purchasing decisions and something that makes them “fall in love” with a brand. But here's the best part: smiling as an employee will actually foster a positive attitude in *yourself*, as well. That's because a [smile itself, even when forced, has the power to actually change attitudes](#) and make you feel happier!

Posture is associated with confidence; the better your posture, the more confident you appear to the customer. There's the added benefit of making it much more likely that they'll trust your input and suggested solutions, especially when an explanation is a bit more on the complicated side. Further to this, keeping an open stance by *facing* the customer will make you appear far more approachable and engaged in the conversation. One's posture can either be ‘open’ or ‘closed’. Crossing your arms is a classic example of closed body language, as it is usually construed as either intimidating or guarded, both of which are bound to be unwelcoming to a customer! It can also give the impression that you're merely trying to *persuade* the customer rather than working with them to help find a solution to their needs. Other examples of negative body language which signal rejection or make someone appear disengaged include crossed legs, slouching, fidgeting or hands touching hair, avoidance of eye contact, or your body being turned away from the customer. Instead, strive for examples of positive body language such as open hands, facing the customer directly, eyes open wide and focused on the customer, raised eyebrows and signals of positive reinforcement such as smiling or nodding. Let's quickly highlight that last one, *nodding*. Nodding is a highly persuasive element of body language. In the context of customer service, it reliably communicates to the customer

that you're actively listening to them and taking them seriously. During your interaction, nodding can project the impression that you understand their situation or recognise the issue they're facing. For example, you could nod to show customers that you *can* indeed process their return request.

To avoid crossing your arms, try to keep them by your sides unless you're using them to illustrate a point. On this note, one [study](#) showed that when you *do* use hand gestures correctly in conjunction with what you're saying, listeners are 20% more likely to hear and interpret what's being said! Hand gestures can help portray a point and convey your enthusiasm, but it's important not to overdo it, as excessive hand gestures can be a distraction. For example, if you're selling goods, you could use your hands and posture to accentuate a product's features and demonstrate your passion for it, resulting in a much more positive reaction from customers. For example, you might want to introduce 'flowing' gestures, such as opening your palms and moving them upwards, to encourage people to listen to you. Or perhaps you could use your hands to indicate the range of items a customer can purchase as part of a sale, say. That being said, it's important to avoid unnecessary movement, such as fidgeting or walking from one side of the room to the other, as it can make customers feel uncomfortable or distract them. At its worst, it can even signify that you're more interested in another task than helping them or just plain bored.

Something that can rapidly make your customers uncomfortable is invading their personal space. Make a point of keeping a respectful distance between yourself and the customer to avoid making them uncomfortable or anxious. Most people would react to an invasion of their personal space by backing away or cutting the interaction short if the discomfort becomes unbearable. When engaging with a customer, allow a distance of a few feet between you so you are not too close or too distant from the customer. Observing their personal space in this way is a sign that you respect them and value their comfort, and it will positively affect their attitude towards you during your interaction.

Another popular psychological technique you can try is known as 'mirroring'. When people meet for the first time, they'll more often than not subconsciously scan for similarities indicating that a connection or bond will be formed. Mirroring the customer's body language, choice of words, or tone is an effective way to establish rapport and build a solid relationship with the customer. By matching their gestures, facial expressions and posture as naturally and subtly as possible, customers, in general, will gravitate towards you as they will feel that you have a lot in common, paving the way for future positive interactions with them! You might also mirror a customer's choice of words. For example, if you notice the customer tends to use certain words in their interaction, you can boost relatability by using those same words in your response. In one [study](#), mirroring or 'mimicry' increased goodwill towards the researcher in a matter of minutes.

Although not strictly *body* language, it's still classed as non-verbal communication and is worth mentioning here to complete the picture: *tone*. In the service industry, your tone of voice is very often the determining factor between delivering positive and negative customer service. Your tone of voice can dramatically influence how your

message comes across to the customer. Therefore, it's paramount to keep your tone under control, especially when an interaction or sale isn't going according to plan. Being monotonic can give the appearance of disinterest, while being overly enthusiastic can make you seem insincere. Aim instead for a happy medium with a casual yet professional tone which is friendly and agreeable.

If you remember one thing from this session, remember this. Your non-verbal communication and body language speak *volumes*.

This week, make a mental note of where you might be displaying closed body language. Consider what you could switch this out for, and notice whether customers respond differently to you depending on your body language.

That's all for today. Thanks for listening.