

Sharpen Your Tools

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More than WORDS by Melinda Marcus

How to win over customers with nonverbal communication

Nonverbal communication is not limited to body language. It refers to anything—including your environment— that communicates a message, feeling or thought without using words. To explore how this might help your company, ask yourself three questions:

- How does the look of our facilities impact our customers' experiences?
- Can we influence behavior by making subtle changes to customer touchpoints?
- Are there low-cost opportunities to create high-value nonverbal messages?

Reading People—and Places

In my consulting and coaching practice, I show executives how to read people through their nonverbal cues, so they can gain valuable insights into what someone is thinking, feeling or even intending to do. By reading someone's body language, facial expressions and voice patterns, you can recognize early when you have buy-in or when the other person has objections you need to address. The person you are trying to persuade may not reveal their feelings out loud, but if you can read the nonverbal communication, you have the best opportunity to win them over. This gives you an advantage with people, but how do non-verbal cues work for facilities?

This is where a particular form of nonverbal communication comes in: haptics. This is the science of how the sense of touch influences the way people feel.

In Western culture, studies show a simple touch on the shoulder or arm can create a positive connection. In fact, when it comes to getting a loan approved, touching the banker on the arm increases an applicant's success rate. Why? Because we have millions of sensors in our skin, and the touch sends a message to the brain to release oxytocin, the hormone that causes us to feel a positive bond. Of course, the banker is not conscious that the applicant's touch on the arm influenced the loan decision. The banker will defend the decision as based purely on the facts, but the research proves otherwise. The same is true when a customer touches anything in your facility. The tactile sensations influence their feelings about your brand, even though they may not be aware of it.

Engaging Your Customers

An architectural firm engineer told me the best investment I could make for my new office entrance was the front door hardware. Haptics research validates this advice as well. The feel of the door handle makes an indelible first impression. It's subtle, but it's real. Just like the banker, visitors may not be conscious of how the doorknob influenced them, but it has the power to shape their impression of the company. This is true for handshakes as well. If it's solid and feels good to the touch, it will positively impact their feelings about us.

The same is true for your facilities. While I can't remember most door handles, there are a few restaurants that have very creative door hardware. One pancake house chain uses iron spatulas as the handles, which engages both the visual and tactile senses. The special hardware nonverbally makes a strong statement to customers as they enter: "This will be better than other pancake places. It's going to be delicious and fun!" The look and feel of the door handles predispose customers to like the food and the place.

Once you're inside, the weight and size of the coffee cups and plates felt substantial. This is leveraging haptics, too. It influences people to believe the higher price of eating at this chain is worth it because of the perceived value of the large portions, quality of the food and the fun experience. Does the chain deliver on that expectation? In my experience, they do, but like any other customer, I don't know how much my opinion is being influenced on an unconscious level by the facility's nonverbal communications.

Even notable wine critics say wine tasted better when served in Riedel glasses. However, when they participated in blind taste tests, where they couldn't see the wine glasses, they reported no difference in the perceived taste of the same wine. When it comes to what influences people, perception is reality!

Nonverbal Communication and Theft

Can a facility's nonverbal communications prevent theft? Absolutely. You may not have considered this, but protective lighting is a form of nonverbal communications to discourage burglars. There also are more subtle ways to persuade people not to behave badly.

I learned this from a major shopping center manager who I consulted with on shoppers' communications. The manager's office was located inside the center, so I used the same restroom as customers. I commented to my client how impressed I was with the ladies' restroom, which had lots of wonderful details, such as a small lovely bud vase on the counter. However, when I touched the vase, it felt slick, so I mentioned they might want to clean it. To my surprise, the manager informed me that they put Vaseline on the vase intentionally because the slimy feel stopped people from stealing it.

This is a great example of a low-cost way to use haptics to influence customer behavior. I imagine many customers, like me, credited management for displaying the nice bud vase. If they touched it, they probably assumed the slimy feel was the fault of another customer, not management. Imagine how differently customers would have felt if management had taken a written approach by posting a sign reading, "Don't touch the vase." This would have made people feel defensive, and all the goodwill from the pretty bud vase would have been overturned by the sign's admonishment. By using haptics to nonverbally influence the desired behavior, management won good feelings from customers, while minimizing the risk of theft.

Implementing Nonverbal Communication

Haptics is leveraged in many industries to attract and build customer loyalty. Think about the way different smartphones look and feel. Notice how car brands use haptics in the design of steering wheels and touch control panels on the dashboards. Often, it doesn't take a major capital expenditure to influence customers' perception.

One national amusement park spent millions of dollars on a state-of-the-art new roller coaster and, at the same time, spent less than \$50,000 to renovate the bathrooms by adding warmer decorative touches such as wainscoting. At the end of the customers' visits, they filled out a survey to rate their favorite things at the park. The new roller coaster was ranked second; the nice bathrooms came in first.

It's not surprising that bathrooms make a big impression. First of all, customers have low expectations of how nice that experience will be. It is also a very personal experience where people touch—or try to avoid touching—a lot of items. Small changes can exceed their expectations, which results in disproportional positive impact on their overall impressions of your facility.

Next time you visit one of your facilities, sit at a table and take time to observe how your customers interact with the things they touch. Be conscious of your own experience there. Sometimes even a small change can have a big impact. Then, ask yourself, "How could our facilities communicate nonverbally with customers to influence them to choose our brand over competitors?"

Melinda Marcus, C.S.P., M.A., will lead a breakout session at the RFMA 2018 annual conference in Phoenix. A recognized expert in the science of influence, Marcus works with clients from Fortune 500 companies to leading regional organizations on how to ethically and effectively persuade people. Her Master Nonverbal Communications training is with the former special agent who trained the FBI. As a result of her consulting, executives have won multi-million-dollar decisions and grown assets by \$275 million.