

# Sign Language

By  
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*His socks compelled one's attention without losing one's respect.  
-Saki (Hector Hugh Munro)*

## **A startling discovery**

Back in the day when I was in Human Resources I made a startling discovery. Interviewing hundreds (thousands, even) of candidates who worked hard to show me their best side, there was often something about them that revealed the truth. These little truths were obvious to me but the candidates probably never noticed how much they revealed about themselves. I remember one young lady who was interviewing for the position of Sales Assistant for the brokerage firm where I was HR director. She was wearing a very conservative grey pin striped suit with a conservative haircut, briefcase and shoes. She looked great, the picture of the perfect applicant for our ultra conservative firm but I knew that wasn't who she really was. How? In her zeal to project the right image, she couldn't resist adding just a touch of her authentic self in the large rhinestone earrings with the dangles that screamed something else entirely.

We all do it. We just have to express ourselves and we somehow believe no one will notice. My startling discovery? Believe the aberration, the thing that doesn't work. It is the best evidence of who the other person really is. So what does this have to do with perfecting your pitch? Two things. First, be sure your image is completely consistent and communicates what you want others to believe about you and notice the little things about the people you are pitching to. The devil really is in the details, so pay attention!

## **The Quentin Tarantino Effect**

In Hollywood, much is made of the ultra-creative and his (or her) value to the profitability of the project. Quentin Tarantino is a perfect example. His hat-on-backwards, quirky look screams creative. It adds to his mystique as an extraordinary filmmaker. Now, I'm not telling you to go to your pitch as Bozo the Clown but it pays to use everything you've got to communicate your value. For example, a television producer I work with was having trouble being taken seriously when pitching her show ideas. After talking the problem over with an image consultant, she was advised to select one item of clothing that would say quite clearly CREATIVE and POWER to her audience. That item? Why, shoes of course! She bought a pair of pointy red shoes that made her feel brilliant, powerful and confident. They said the same thing to the people she was pitching to. But remember, a new pair of shoes or a hat-on-backwards may be cool but nothing can overcome a poorly thought out concept or idea so don't expect an expensive accessory to do your work for you. It's only icing on what we hope is a very good cake.

## **Every little movement has a meaning of its own**

Once you get past the clothing issues, there are two things to be on the look-out for--body language and gestures and territorial space and positioning. What's important when reading body language and gestures is that they are relevant only when they change. Watch for changes in body language that come in response to what is going on. For example, if someone you are pitching is wearing glasses, note that looking over the glasses can indicate disbelief or disapproval. Repeatedly cleaning glasses signals that person may want more time to think. But once that person lays his glasses on the table, he is telling you he is no longer listening. I remember pitching to a group of venture capitalists a few years ago. The product I was describing was a very ambitious environmental aerial imaging system. Unfortunately, it was not a project aligned with this group's investment objectives which their body language made abundantly clear just a few minutes into my pitch.

## **Give them space!**

Have you ever had someone get right in your face as he made his point? If you found yourself backing away, it's because we all have a comfort zone that feels violated when people we don't have a relationship with or know very well crowd into our space. It is also true that different cultures have their own unique perspectives on space. Be well prepared for any situation. If you are pitching to people from different backgrounds or parts of the world, learn how space is used in their cultures.

Where you place yourself in the room also affects both the perceptions of the other parties present and the flow of information. Here are a few things to remember.

- Avoid sitting between two people you are pitching to otherwise it will be difficult to observe them. Sit where you can see them both. Let them sit first. Put yourself on the other side.
- When dealing with groups, split up seating to break up their power.
- Two people sitting together are seen as one person. If there are two or more of you pitching, split up to have more voices.
- Your size vs. the size of the other person. Step back or sideways to reduce the effect of overpowering the other person.

Knowledge is power! The more you know about how you and others communicate through clothing, gestures, body language and use of space, the more powerful the connection with your audience will be.

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