

## Lessons from the Field

### A “High Touch” Lesson for Hospitality Managers - Understanding Body Language

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Like many other industries, the every day environment of hospitality includes some very useful high tech tools that help project revenues, identify the level of sales booking pace, manage inventory, monitor payroll and more.

It remains essential though in our world of welcoming people to our establishments that we retain a solid focus on the “high touch” side of the every-day interactions with people.

**Understanding body language is a talent that can increase your successes in life.** You can recognize what a person feels and likely thinks by examining their subliminal body language. This can be both a business and social skill that allows you to better communicate and interact with the people in your life over the long haul.

*“The problem with communication ... is the illusion that it has been accomplished.”*

*George Bernard Shaw*

A person’s words may be hinting one message to you, but her/his body language could be sending a conflicting signal. Through body movements, lack of or full eye contact, facial expressions and gestures, you can often read into a person’s genuine intentions. As a rule, body language communicates more about what someone says than what her/his own words do.

People in the business community use body language interpretation everyday when they interview potential employees. When they interpret body language, they are looking for a variety of movements that indicate if the person is uncomfortable answering certain questions or talking about particular subjects. If you observe that s/he is uncomfortable about certain points on their resume, their body language may provide you a better analysis of past employment experience than the words and resume combined. Body language is often used in the legal system as well, as noted that when a witness is testifying, their attorney will frequently advise them to make proper eye contact with certain other parties (such as the jury) in the courtroom in an effort to build credibility.

#### Lessons for Hospitality Managers

The certification reviews for most of the programs offered by the Educational Institute of the American Hotel & Lodging Association include a section on communication. This section includes the facts on how written communication is best suited for technical, factual or legal effectiveness, while vocal communication is best for sales and personal interactions.

The reason is not hard to grasp – we hear the spoken word, but it is our body language or verbal communication that tell us almost instantly if we have made a connection.

For example, if we send a direct mail piece about our hotel in Kentucky to a reader that has never been to the Blue Grass state, they will likely pitch the flyer, as they have no connection. If they take

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a phone call from someone they know slightly about the Lexington area, they might have a possible interest in the University, but they may not like doing business by phone. On the other hand, if we get a face-to-face meeting and “see” by the person’s responses what motivates the person about the city – the ball team, the library, the gardens, architecture, the business department, the caliber of graduates from a certain program or whatever, then the connection is made.

There are entire books written about body language, and the internet has thousands of articles, advertisements and ideas. I ask readers to consider the following as starting points:

1. Avoid putting obstructions between you and the other person, such as a briefcase, a package or presentation piece. This is applicable when speaking with staff or potential clients.
2. Do not sit behind a desk, but keep the communication flow smooth.
3. Learn about people’s private space, which varies by gender, age and race. The closer they are, generally the warmer their opinions are of you. The farther away that someone is, the less they care. It is worth noting that personal space is culturally sensitive; what is considered close in one country is far away in another.
4. Do not make others feel uncomfortable. This can be handled by ensuring the words spoken are comprehended by the other party – their body language will tell you if they understand.
5. The eyes are a primary key to understanding. People who look away while supposedly listening to you are often thinking about something else. This is why when you are talking to a group of people, if an item in conversation interests someone who may be looking away, they will ask for you to repeat the story. Some cultures believe that looking at someone in the eyes is a sign of disrespect, so we must be sensitive to the cultural diversity in our hospitality businesses.
6. Use your hands to demonstrate your point if that is your style, but do not point AT the other person.
7. Watch for people’s habits, as some may be nervous, but others can be using negotiating and stall tactics.
8. Recognize what agreement signs are, such as subtle nodding, slight smiles and the inclination to complete the business being discussed.
9. Recognize what disagreement signs are such as wandering eyes, frowns or folded arms.
10. Learn to read signs of closure or acceptance, such as crossed legs or leaning inwards.



There is an interesting overview of the topic in

<http://www.wikihow.com/Read-Body-Language>

It is important to observe as many body language signs as quickly as possible to determine the best course of action with each person.

## *What are you doing at your hotel today?*

Feel free to share an idea for a column at [johnjhogan@yahoo.com](mailto:johnjhogan@yahoo.com) anytime or contact me regarding consulting, customized workshops, speaking engagements .....

And remember – we all need a regular dose of common sense.

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*This column will be included in an upcoming book on hotel management.*

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*John Hogan, a career hotelier and educator, is a frequent speaker and seminar leader at many hospitality industry events. He is a successful senior executive with a record of accomplishment leading organizations at multiple levels. His professional experience includes over 35 years in hotel operations, food & beverage, sales & marketing, training, management development, consulting, management, including service as Senior VP of Operations.*



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*As the principal in an independent training & consulting group, he served associations, management groups, convention & visitors' bureaus, academic institutions and as an expert witness. He has managed hotels with Sheraton, Hilton, Omni and independents and in his tenure at Best Western International, he created and launched a blended learning system for the world's largest hotel chain. He has conducted an estimated 3,200 workshops and classes in his career, including service as an adjunct faculty member for 20 years at three different institutions.*