



Detecting the Uncertainties in Communication

“A blur of blinks, taps, jiggles, pivots and shifts ... the body language of a man wishing urgently to be elsewhere.”

- Edward R. Murrow

BY CAROL L. BROOKS, SR/WA

You find yourself in the kitchen of a property owner, describing your project and explaining the right of way plans. The owner asks questions and makes suggestions, and you sense that this is an opportune time to bring up the topic of compensation. Imagine your surprise when the owner suddenly changes his body language. He begins drumming his fingers anxiously on the table, clearing his throat and crossing his arms. Is there a clear message here?

A common misconception is that the words people use indicate how they really feel. In reality, the most authentic form of communication is demonstrated through body language.

Interpreting body language involves more than identifying the different body positions and their meaning. The first step is to determine if a particular gesture is a genuine signal, a random event or simply a misleading display of body language.

There is a way to increase the odds of interpreting body language correctly. It begins with being aware and looking below the surface. Here are some tips:

Consider the Situation: Taking a gesture out of context can easily lead to misinterpretation. Before forming an instant conclusion, consider what else is going on. For example, during a property negotiation, if an owner scratches her nose, at first glance it may appear that she has an itch. However, if she continues touching her nose over an extended period of time, then it forms a different

context, especially if it happens every time the agent asks a question. In this case, there is a strong indication she may be lying or misleading in her responses.

Watch for Groupings: With someone displaying dozens of signals at any given time, it's important not to attach a separate meaning to each one. Instead, look for groupings. If you observe several indicators happening repetitively or simultaneously, the signals start to add up. If an owner is folding and unfolding their hands, moving their feet and can't seem to sit still, the agent can be fairly certain that they are uncomfortable with the situation and feeling anxious.

Sensing Mixed Signals: If the owner's words, tone of voice and body language are all conveying the same message, we are likely getting a true signal. But when the owner says one thing and their body language says something else, we need to become more alert. This may be a sign that they are trying to deceive us in some way. Watch for indications of incongruence, as this will help you determine whether the owner is being forthright.

Look for Uniformity: Watch for obvious patterns in people's behavior. If you notice the owner holding her head up with the palm of her hand, you might conclude that she is bored. However, as you look at the bigger picture, you might find a pattern. If the owner has shown other signs of fatigue since you arrived for the meeting, a few questions might uncover that she was up all night with their baby

and got little sleep. In this case, her body language has little to do with the meeting itself.

Understand Cultural Differences:

People tend to forget that cultural differences in body language can be enormous. For example, in the Eskimo culture, moving ones head up and down means “no,” while shaking it from side to side means “yes.” If you find yourself negotiating with people from different cultures, take a moment to research typical body language patterns in advance of an in-person meeting.

To sharpen your observation skills, consider watching television with the sound muted. When you can't hear what's being said, you will find yourself keenly aware of the actor's gestures. Did you notice a furrowed brow, a casual shoulder shrug or a heavy swallow? Hidden in these gestures are the various uncertainties that are embedded in our non-verbal communication.

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