



Unit 5

Verbal Communication Techniques

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

1. Better understand and utilize the characteristics and important nuances of verbal communication
2. Understand and utilise a wide variety of verbal communication techniques effectively

Verbal Communication Techniques

What's missing in Telephone Communication?

It's Not What You Say; It's How You Say It

The goal of a very famous and often quoted (and misquoted) study by Albert Mehrabian was to figure out how much of what we say contributes to whether the listener likes the speaker. Although the study has been hotly debated, the findings were indisputable. For the people that participated in the study, the words themselves contributed only about 7% to whether the listener connected to the speaker. Listeners got much more information (38%) when they could also see facial expressions; when they were also able to read body language, the results were even better, at 55%. (*Source: Silent Messages, Albert Mehrabian, 1971*)

This is often generalized to mean that in *all* communications:

- Ñ 7% comes through the spoken word.
- Ñ 38% is realized through voice tone.
- Ñ 55% is the result of body language.

If we look at those numbers quickly, we might think that it cannot be true. An e-mail is written and is not limited to 7% worth of understanding. Similarly, we cannot watch a person speaking in a foreign language and understand 93% of what they say. However, there are important implications for working in a call center and providing customer service over the phone. Since you are limited to speaking over the phone, you know that you have about a 7% potential to be heard. You also have complete control over your vocal tone, which is another 38% of your message. And, did you know that your body language, although your listener cannot see it, could be used to your advantage as well?

Implications

While you might debate the exact numbers, the important points are:

- Ñ A significant amount of communication is non-verbal.
- Ñ Without the chance to observe non-verbal aspects like your facial expressions or body language, it is easier for your message to be misunderstood.
- Ñ When we do not know the other person who is speaking, we do not trust them. Therefore, our tendency is to rely on what we can hear and see in order to enhance our understanding.
- Ñ Be cautious in e-mail communication; things can be easily misunderstood.

In the Absence of Body Language

Despite working in a call center environment and perhaps feeling like you are at a disadvantage, there are several things that you can do to enhance your communication. For example, if we meet people in person and feel that they are not telling the truth, we often check out the alignment between what they say, how they say it, and their body language. Work on your own listening skills and assess the alignment between what you say and the way that you say it.

Here are some things to keep in mind about using body language to your advantage over the phone:

- Ñ **Eyes, eyebrows, and mouth** send out signals that can make a world of difference.
- Ñ If you are speaking to someone in person (a colleague, supervisor, or client that comes into the office), use their presence to your advantage.
- Ñ People who smile are happier than those who don't. Smiling releases a chemical in your brain that makes you feel good. It's a great way to establish a rapport with listeners.
- Ñ Hang a **small mirror** at your face level or keep it in a drawer of your desk. Each time you are about to answer a call, smile into the mirror. The benefit will be a small chemical release for you and your voice will carry the "sound" of your smile.
- Ñ **Eye contact** helps you carry your message to each person in the audience. It also builds trust. In the call center, make sure that you maintain eye positions and posture that convey the same message. Sit up straight, and position your script and computer screen to be at the correct level in order to help you convey your message effectively. If you are staring off into space or distracted by sights and sounds in your office, your voice will give your distraction away.
- Ñ If you were doing sales in person, we would recommend that you learn to speak with your hands. In the call center, however, it is important to **keep your hands still**. If you are gesturing while on the phone, you can pull your head away from the microphone and create noise, or move too far away from the microphone for your voice to be easily heard. Keep your hands close to your body; hovering over a keyboard and typing or taking notes is as much movement as you will need during a call.
- Ñ Work on appearing **sincere and comfortable**. This means that you need to speak in a voice that is sincere, and that you know your script and potential responses. You should also get accustomed to your headset.
- Ñ If you are inputting responses on a keyboard while on the phone, make sure that you **type quietly** and that your keyboard does not have noisy rattles that your caller can overhear. When the caller notices a lot of noise, including people talking in the background or you tapping your pen on your desk, they will think that you are not paying attention to their needs.
- Ñ In **person-to-person interactions**, try keeping your gestures symmetrical and in front of your abdomen. Communication expert Chris Bowden refers to this as the **truthplane**.

One of the most important things you can do with body language is learn to pick up cues from people that you are making them uncomfortable. These include:

- Ñ Rocking
- Ñ Leg swinging
- Ñ Tapping

These are the first signals of tension and indicate that the person feels intruded upon or nervous. If it escalates, these signals are often followed by:

- Ñ Intermittent closing of the eyes
- Ñ Slight tucking of the chin into the chest
- Ñ Shoulder hunching

Basically, learn to watch for these signs and adjust your approach. Sometimes simply taking one step back, being silent, or getting the other person to talk to you instead, will be all it takes to ease the tension.

(Source: Silent Messages by Albert Mehrabian)

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Being Yourself and Sounding Your Best

Think for a moment about the fact that you work on the phone to make your living. Acknowledge that and allow yourself to feel excited about the potential for being someone who makes his or her living through telephone-based conversations. The ability for you to manage your voice – something that you have complete control over – means that you can exercise a lot of influence in any phone call.

Some people have a **phone voice** (a tone that they adopt when they pick up the phone and answer it at home or at work). Your phone voice might actually sound quite different from what you might think. In addition to the qualities of your own voice, telephones and headsets can really distort your voice.

Many, if not all call centers, use some kind of **one-piece headset with a built-in earpiece**. Depending on the quality of that equipment, as well as the telephone lines, your voice can sound distorted and interfere with the impact of your message. Trying to sound sincere? You might come across as condescending. Trying to sound committed? You could be heard as threatening. That's why it is so important to become aware of your voice and to make it an instrument in your toolbox, just like your keyboard, computer screen, and chair help you do your job.

Symphony of Voice

Your voice is a symphony created by the following elements.

Breath control gives your voice its power. Good breath control is a result of proper posture and good care of your physical health, particularly the lungs and diaphragm. You are not breathing effectively if you are slumped and slouching at your desk. Make it a habit to sit up straight when you talk on the telephone. You will also notice that the more physically fit you are, the better control you have over your lung capacity and the more effectively you speak.

Tone is the quality of your voice as air moves from your chest through your larynx. If you are angry or upset, surprised or excited, callers will hear it in your voice and notice it. Although you cannot eliminate negative aspects of tone completely, you can manage them with concentration and practice.

Articulation is the way that you pronounce sound by using your mouth, lips, and jaw to form words. Articulation is highly responsive to practice, so if you wish to change the way you pronounce things, practice can certainly make perfect.

There are no right and wrong rules about **speech patterns**. Just be aware of your accent and vocal patterns and think about how they are helping you at work. Although a regional accent may provide more appeal in some areas, for example, you have to think about whether that same accent interferes with clear communication. As our workplaces continue to diversify, and as call centers are opened in different regions to provide 24/7 or global service, the number of accents and regional variations will increase.

As well, it is not possible to speak clearly when you have something in your mouth. A call center is not somewhere that you can eat or drink and expect to work successfully at the same time. Gum, food, and smoking will all interfere with clear speech.

The Four E's

The four E's of an effective telephone voice are as follows.

Expressive

Use your voice to vary the tone of what you say and rate to make it interesting to hear.

Enunciate

Use clear enunciation and master articulation. We can be casual when speaking with friends or family, dropping a final consonant like the "g" in an "ing" ending or truncating the middle letters of a word. Unfortunately, when we do that on the telephone, the sound of these shortcuts gets exaggerated. Open your mouth and speak clearly.

Engage

Your voice should be smooth and pleasant, not whining or complaining. Communicate that you are happy in your work (and a happy person overall) in order to engage your caller. Speaking in anger or being curt will put your call – and your company – in a negative light.

Energize

Your voice needs to really shine when you use the telephone as your instrument. You need to feel energy and pass that positive flow through to your callers. This means that you approach your job as if it the only thing that matters right now, and that the caller you currently have on the line is the most important caller ever. Although it sounds corny and will probably feel uncomfortable sometimes, think about the call center agents you speak to in your own life, and what it was that led you to talk to them, buy from them, or made the conversation pleasant. Inject energy and joy into your voice and work from the attitude that you are there to serve your customer, and you will be more likely to meet your targets.

A Service Image

Service Provider	Robertsnanlewisnwehaveyerwinsheeldhullo.
Caller	Uh, hello, is this the windshield shop?
Service Provider	Yathisizrobertsnanlewisnwehaveyerwinsheeldhowcanihelpyou?
Caller	I have an appointment Saturday to replace my windshield.
Service Provider	Uhuh.
Caller	I need to confirm the time. I cannot remember the time.
Service Provider	Justasecanilltranseryoutosomeeelz.

Have you ever had an experience like that, where you call a number to find out some information and then cannot even tell if you've reached the right number because you cannot understand a word that's being said? To the caller, the credibility of the organization is now in question.

The service image that you promote is just as important as the service itself. In that phone call, you represent the company, and like it or not, the company pays you to promote their image. The conversation should have gone as follows:

Service Provider	Robertson and Lewis. We have your windshield. How can I help you?
Caller	I have an appointment on Saturday, but I cannot remember the time.
Service Provider	Let me pull up your record, sir. Can you please give me your telephone number?

Further Reading:

- ✓ Verbal communication. Berlin: De Gruyter
- ✓ Mehrabian, A. (2007). Nonverbal Communication. New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transaction.