Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

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Communication Modes

All the tools and efforts of the customer service worker (CSW) come down to how effectively we communicate with the customers we serve, both verbally and nonverbally. With verbal communication, we can make our meaning understood through syntax (word order and phrasing) and semantics (word choice and meaning). Are we being clear with our word choice? Are we speaking at a proper pace and volume? Does our voice sound friendly and calm?

With nonverbal communication, we can make our attitude understood. Are we standing in a self-assured yet non-threatening way? Are we maintaining a comfortable level of eye contact? Are we engaging with our gestures? Do we project warmth and concern?

Verbal Communication Techniques

Not everyone has the voice of a broadcast reporter, but everyone can employ tactics to help hold the attention of a listener. Speak with short words: our customers may be highly educated, but when it comes to their particular product or needs, you are the expert and should gently help them understand potentially confusing concepts.

Some customers may be hard of hearing, but this can be difficult to know, especially over the telephone. If they tilt their head or frequently ask you to repeat yourself, they may not be hearing you well, and you can try speaking a little louder. If they back away, or move their head back, you may be speaking too loudly. The customer may also prefer to converse in quieter tones if he or she is nervous or is concerned about privacy when other people are nearby.
Another important aspect of verbal communication is your speech rate. A good speech rate is about 120–150 words a minute; that comes to about two words a second. This may sound fast, but it really isn’t. If you count the to 30 seconds using the one-one-thousand, two-one-thousand, three-one-thousand method, you will be speaking about four syllables (or two words) a second. Try it, and that will simulate an appropriate rate of speech when explaining important or challenging information to a customer.

A good general rule is to mimic the customer's volume and speech rate, both of which might help you understand your customer’s communicative preferences. It is a matter of being sensitive to a customer’s reaction, and gauging your own volume and rate accordingly.

**Nonverbal Communication Techniques**

Much of our communication is not so much in what we say, but in how we say it. For effective nonverbal communication, you want to convey that you are self-confident, capable, and in control of the situation. You don’t want to communicate that you are aggressive, superior, or domineering.

You can express yourself best by using effective nonverbal and physical techniques. Present a calm relaxed face, especially if your customer seems agitated, confused, or angry. Smile warmly and try to put some friendliness in your eyes. Maintain intermittent eye contact, although it is important to understand that the meaning of this varies by culture: some people may hold longer eye contact to demonstrate openness and sincerity, while other cultures don’t hold eye contact at all, and may see an attempt to do so as a threatening gesture. Adjust your approach based on your observations of your customer and your understanding of the situation.
Stand erect, but don’t tower over your customers or lean into their personal space. Use gentle and open-handed gestures, rather than gestures that may be abrupt or aggressively close handed.

There is also paralanguage, which you can use to engage your customer. This means the sounds you make, rather than spoken words, such as *uh-huh, ahh, and huh?* These sounds encourage your customers, and assure them that you’re listening and engaged. This is especially important if you are talking on the telephone, and your customer is unable to confirm visually that he or she has your attention. And when communicating over the phone don’t forget, the tone of your voice can be very expressive.

The most important aspects of both verbal and nonverbal communication are to work toward a mutual understanding, make your customer feel at ease, and ultimately ensure your interaction has a productive and satisfying end.

**Summary:**

- Verbal and nonverbal tactics play an important role in effective customer communication.
- Verbal communication makes our meaning understood. Nonverbal communication makes our attitude understood.
- We should use short words for best understanding, and adjust our speaking volume to a level that seems effective for each customer and circumstance.
- A good speech rate is 120-150 words per minute—a little slower than our normal speaking speed might be—especially when communicating important or difficult information.
- If we mimic our customers’ speaking volume and speed, this may help to judge the most effective approach to take with them.
- Nonverbal communication such as body language relays much information about our attitude to a customer.
- We should stand with a confident yet non-threatening posture, smile with a calm face, maintain appropriate eye contact, use open gestures, and use paralanguage to encourage customers while they’re speaking.