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How to network without saying a word



Janelle Nanos, Forbes.com

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For some schmoozers, networking is the art of working the room, glad-handling folks while oozing charm. But much of networking depends on what you don't say. Often, getting ahead in the game means knowing what messages you're sending before you open your mouth.

The key to networking without words is realizing what you're communicating at all times. "We tend to forget that silence speaks," says Patrick Miller, author of *Body Language on the Job*. "It's a matter of paying attention and being cognizant of what you're doing nonverbally. Everything you're doing is being watched."

And the watching begins the first second you meet. In Malcolm Gladwell's best-selling book *Blink*, he spends 288 pages describing the two-second period in which snap judgments are made. This "rapid cognition" about body language, clothing and appearance can help determine whether someone thinks you're a competent candidate or a criminal. "In an interview situation, research shows that positive or negative impressions are made very early on," says Tim Butler, the director of career development programs at Harvard Business School. "Often, the rest of the interview is to confirm the initial impression."

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So when networking, it's best to err on the side of formality, says Dr. David Givens, the director of the Center for Nonverbal Studies in Spokane, Wash. It may seem like motherly advice, but Givens insists there's science behind the adage that you should stand up straight and wear a suit. "There are animal vibes [in the business world], and you need to show you're strong," he says. "Fortunately, there are certain optical illusions built into a jacket that make you think a person is bigger and stronger than he or she really is."

A suit's sleeves make arms appear thicker and more intimidating, and padding in the shoulders masks subconscious shrugging that might make you look weak. "The slightest shrug will be seen and decoded unconsciously that you're not 100% sure of what you're doing," Givens says.

Then there's the added benefit of the flare of the lapel - up and out - which gives the appearance of puffing out your chest, also conveying strength. "That's why the suit jacket has survived," he says. "It has these messages built in."

And the tie? It serves its animalistic purpose as well, creating a vertical line down the chest, making one appear taller and covering the notch below the Adam's apple that's instinctively seen as a weak point (as in "go for the jugular").

And despite endless analysis of the red "power tie," it's actually best to choose one that's a pastel shade, says Givens, who has found that adding white to a strong color helps to make you seem more approachable on first glance. "You're more likable in lighter colors, as you let a sense of purity and trust show through," he says.

Hand gestures are a decisive way to make a nonverbal impression (as anyone who has ever been cut off on the highway will tell you). But there are far better ways to use your hands. "Avoid looking at your watch, rubbing your nose and arranging your hair," says Miller. "All these unconscious grooming habits collectively paint a picture that you're uncomfortable."

Instead, use your hands to your advantage by keeping them on the table, Givens suggests, since it makes you appear more actively engaged in the discussion. The same connection can be made while dropping off a memo by pausing momentarily and placing your hand on the person's desk. "It shows that you're confident by getting into their territory in an assertive way," says Givens. "It sends a subtle message that you've been closer to them, and that little gesture can sometimes make a difference and stick in the memory, giving you an edge over someone else."

When meeting someone for the first time, a good handshake is vital, says Kevin Ferrazzi, professional development consultant and author of *Never Eat Alone*. He suggests a pair of techniques often used by Bill Clinton that can help you stand out: The two-handed handshake, which shows your enthusiasm, and the quick grab of the elbow, which draws people in. "The ability to extend your hand and pull people in is a powerful way to connect with someone," he says.

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And don't forget to look them in the eye. "I cannot overemphasize the importance of eye contact," says Ferrazzi. "There is nothing worse than the smarmy eye-darter who's consistently looking around the room for someone more important to talk to."

"In America, the expectation for eye contact is extraordinarily high, somewhere north of 90%," says Butler. "Looking away and breaking off contact is often interpreted as a lack of self-confidence or uncertainty." He often has to teach international students to let go of their cultural habits of looking away in deference and allow their eyes to linger.

But it's also important to share attention when listening in a group setting. "A mistake that people often make is to give excessive eye contact to the dominant individual," says Butler. "Zeroing in on the power brokers is obvious behavior. It's not only bad manners, but you're really ignoring people who are important. You need to sweep [your vision] and ensure that you're including everybody. Decisions aren't made just by the boss - they're made by groups."

Most of all, the experts stress, it's important to appear authentic. Actively listen to people while they're talking to you, and extend an open palm in their direction to show you understand what they're saying, says Givens. Try to know who you'll be talking to before you're introduced, and carry a pen and paper to jot down notes on their family, job and interests that you can use later. And don't pull out your business card too quickly, Ferrazzi warns, or you risk pushing your credentials onto someone who might actually be more interested in you as a person, thereby ruining the beginning of a beautiful network.

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