

## Building Rapport: Style Before Substance

Over 90% of a sales dialogue is interpreted through non-verbal communication. This includes facial expressions, physiology, and body language or positioning. But, it also includes your tone of voice, and such other factors as your choice of clothing, the car you drive, or the brand of laptop computer you use. Since we tend to react more to what we think a person meant than to what they actually said, when attempting to build rapport, we need to pay just as much attention to our non-verbal signals as we do to our words.

In his book, *"You Have To Be Believed To Be Heard,"* renowned speech coach Bert Decker confirms that trust and rapport are developed through positive non-verbal communication. According to Decker, the power of body language is, in fact, so strong that it can literally take less than a minute for trust to be built or eroded based on non-verbal communication alone. Successful sales people have known for a long time that decision makers buy from sales people they like and trust. Positive non verbal communication is therefore, critical to your sales success.

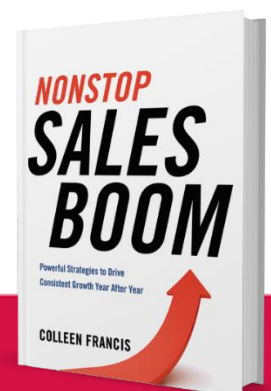
Of course, positive body language doesn't just mean smiling, making eye contact, or assuming an open stance. Researchers say that when you match or mirror the postures, gestures, and tone of voice of whomever you are communicating with, their brain receives unconscious signals that say, *"Hey, you're like me!"* Since people trust those who are most like themselves, you need to think of non-verbal rapport as a dance, where you are the follower and whomever you want to influence is the leader.

Now that you know that non-verbal communication is such an important part of Selling, there are a few techniques you can try to strengthen the rapport you have with others. Remember, the key is to be subtle and discreet. The purpose of mirroring, for example, is not to mimic precisely what a person is doing, such as scratching your left cheek whenever they do. It simply means trying to capture the atmosphere of the interaction, while keeping your actions outside their conscious awareness.

### Top 10 Ways to Improve Your Non-Verbal Communication

**1. First, keep yourself in check by making sure that your body language, words, and tone all match.** Someone recently said to me, "I'm so sorry, you'll be much happier with this solution," and it made me even more upset. How could that be? Shouldn't I be happy that this person was trying to solve my problem? Not in this case, because her words were out of sync with her body language. As she was telling me that she would have the problem fixed, she was standing with her arms tightly crossed against her chest, her hip sticking out sharply to the right, and her eyes rolling. So, what I really heard was, "What a huge pain in the butt you are, I can't believe you're making me go out of my way to find you something new." How effective do you think she was at influencing me towards her new solution?

**2. Make eye contact with everyone in the room.** Don't stare or glare, but look equally at everyone - and don't forget to blink! It's been said that



there are only three degrees of difference between equality (looking squarely at someone), egotism (looking down your nose at someone), and insecurity (looking up at someone with a bowed head). Try this yourself in the mirror to see how clearly even the subtlest difference comes across!

- 3. Capture the atmosphere and spirit of the conversation, and match the other person's posture.** Stand, walk, or sit like them. Pay attention to how they move or remain still. Then, gradually adapt your positions so that they match or mirror theirs.
- 4. Match their tone of voice.** Vocal tone is comprised of pitch (high or low), speed (fast or slow), and volume (loud or soft). If those around you are speaking in quieter or more boisterous tones, do the same.
- 5. Be genuinely excited and enthused.** People are more easily influenced when they sense that you are enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and interested in what you are sharing. So smile, and always look confident.
- 6. Check your attitude problems at the door.** Use your positive body language list to reposition your attitude until your mood improves.
- 7. Know the audience you want to influence, and dress accordingly.** If you know they are a suit crowd, wear a suit. If they're a jeans and t-shirt crowd, choose something closer to that style. You'll be surprised how quickly trust is built when you appear to be one of them.
- 8. Match the handshake of every person you meet.** Yes, contrary to popular advice, if you get a "wet fish", then give them a limp handshake right back. Similarly, match a crushing grip with your own strongest hand-masher. This exercise is especially fun in receiving lines, or when greeting many people coming into a meeting!
- 9. Gesture and motion as others do, or don't.** If they fold their arms and lean back, you do it too.
- 10. Send thank-you cards to everyone you meet,** everyone who takes the time to talk to you about themselves or their business, and everyone who helps you with something. Make sure these cards are handwritten on good stationary, usually the simpler the better, and don't use them for advertising or self-promotion. I've found that, for every six of these notes I send out, I get two inquiries about my business, and one new customer. Why does it work? Rapport. When you give something to someone, they respond in kind. In the case of a thank-you note, I give them my genuine interest in them or their business, and they respond by giving me their time or commitment.

Remember that it takes less than one minute to make an impression with a decision maker. Make the right impression and you will develop trust and get the sale. Develop the wrong impression and you will lose the business to someone else.

## Can Your Sales Team's Rapport with Clients Be Too Strong?

Relationships between companies and their clients are complex in nature, the deepest link being between the sales rep themselves with their clients. One frequent issue that often arises is the level of rapport between a customer and an individual sales rep. Companies are often concerned that if that sales rep leaves for any reason, whether they are fired or otherwise choose to leave on their own, that customer will go with them. They worry that a strong rapport between their sales rep and a customer will result in loyalty to the individual, rather than the relationship. It's a valid concern, but there are ways to combat the issue that will lead to a stronger overall bond with your client.

Balance is essential in these relationships, to ensure closeness between the sales rep and client, as well as safeguard loyalty to the company. To create a balanced relationship that ties the client's loyalty to the company and not a single individual, it's critical that your company takes time to cultivate the following five relationship levels within your organization:

**Level One: Personal Rapport.** Clients need to have to develop strong personal rapport with their primary contact, that sales person. They have to know them, like them and trust them so they'll be compelled to buy from them. It's important as a sales leader to help foster this relationship and acknowledge its significance.

**Level Two: Business Rapport:** Being known liked and trusted is not enough. Today, buyers also need to know that you are a business expert in their line of work. You build business rapport by adding value to every interaction. Ask yourself this question when you meet with the client (in their office or when out for coffee): "How is what I am doing, saying or bringing to the client improving their situation?"

**Level Three: Corporate Rapport.** At a higher level, the customer has to develop a strong corporate rapport with your organization. That means that they trust the corporation. How do you do that? Well the first and easiest step is to ensure the customer knows who the other people are inside the organization. Some key relationships that they should be developing include one with you as the sales leader. If the business is small, the owner of the business should also have some level of rapport with the customer. Additionally, if you have a tech support team or a customer service team, clients should have primary contacts on that team. Lastly, contact with the management, directors or the leadership of that organization is crucial as well. These key leadership contacts are essential to helping the client feel as though they are being given special attention and most importantly, helping them develop loyalty to the company as a whole.

**Level Four: Customer Advisory Panel.** For some of your best customers, you might also consider having the highest level link, a customer advisory panel. This provides your customers with a third relationship level within your corporation in that they're developing relationships within your customer base. This connection will acknowledge the strong association between the two groups, with your company as the connecting link. This bond is an added reinforcement that it's in the best interest of the client to stay with your company.

**Level Five: Testimonials and Case Studies:** Once you've spent a good deal of energy building rapport with clients, the next step is to further strengthen your relationship with testimonials and case studies. We have found that when a client publicly states how much they love your product or how much your company has transformed their business and that is in writing or video or audio, a part of your marketing material, it's very difficult for that customer to leave your organization. Aside from helping to cement your relationship with your current customers, a testimonial or case study allows you to leverage your relationship to grow new client leads.

The secret to effective testimonials is to ensure they highlight a current customer who is in business today, that they're credible, and that the customer is similar to other prospects you want to attract and shares a similar business case. The most critical component of a testimonial is that it must be compelling; it should also be objective and when possible, measurable. A great client testimonial not only provides another piece of support in your relationship with the current client, but it can also be a very powerful source of new business and leads.

By taking the steps to develop a deep relationship with your client in which they touch and are familiar with many layers of your organization and their fellow customers, you can help protect yourself from a customer becoming too strongly attached to a single person within the company. By following our steps, you can meet your goal of creating customer loyalty to your company overall.

## Build Rapport to Navigate Enterprise Organizations

You know the old adage about how it's unwise to put all your eggs in one basket. That wisdom applies just as much to sales today. As you may have heard me say before, one is the most dangerous number in sales. You are at risk if all of your information or all of your business comes from a single point of contact.

To avoid this trap, you need to invest in developing a deeper rapport with more people across a broader range of businesses in your field. Rapport isn't just idle chit-chat. It's the hard-earned outcome of creating a sense of likeness between people, based on having an understanding of each other's feelings, values or ideas.

As a seasoned sales professional, I learned how to sharpen my rapport-building skills, particularly when I was managing large, strategic accounts such as Exxon, Microsoft, and some of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies. In this article, I'm going to share with you what I know about what you can do to accomplish that task, so you can meet and exceed your sales targets by selling more to more people in less time.

### **Adapt to different levels while obtaining referrals**

As a sales executive or a business owner who is selling to large organizations, you know that there are different levels of decision makers in every company. You must adapt your rapport-building approach accordingly. That's not to say that you should overlook junior-level staff or project managers. In fact, to be effective, your efforts need to be from the bottom-up and the top-down at the same time.

Obtaining referrals is a key objective to your rapport-building efforts. And referrals hinge on having conversations that yield the information you need to advance. The right referrals are going to unlock doors and give you the fastest, upward-pointing track to the pinnacle of a company's hierarchy. Finding the right referral is not easy, let's be clear about that! The conversations you have with people have to be focused on moving you up rather than down. Because if you're moved down, there's a risk you might not be able to get back up again.

### **Keeping it simple and visual**

If you were on a long hike on a new trail, you'd likely consult a map, compass or GPS to establish and maintain your bearings. Similarly, your journey through a large-sized organization will earn better results if you adopt this mindset. When it comes to rapport building, knowing where you are in an organization is determined by whether you know the people around you.

Summarize all the information you need on a single sheet of paper. Think of it as your personal rapport map. Make it visible and keep it simple. Just vital details, such as who is the Chief Financial Officer, who are the project managers, who is responsible for technical issues, marketing or other functions specific to the client's organization.

Just as important, identify who in the organization uses your product/service. If there are existing customers in there who are already passionate supporters of who you are and what

you are selling, make sure you list them, too. These people are vital. Not only do they want to see you succeed, they often can provide you with valuable insight and advice to help you achieve your goal.

The goal of this exercise is that you create a visual representation of how strongly positioned you are inside the company. Go another step further. For each person on your personal rapport map, rank your connection on a scale of one to ten. If, for example, you were a godparent to one of their children, then it would be a ten. If, on the other hand, it was a new buyer with no previous history, then it would be a zero.

### **Scale it beyond personal**

When you have established rapport at a personal level with someone, you can feel comfortable enough to call them up and invite them out for drinks. That's a great thing to achieve, but you also need to scale that sense of rapport beyond personal. How well does the company know your business? Answering that question, you may discover that you have some great personal relationship with people who don't have strong rapport with your product or your business.

As a sales trainer and coach, I've worked with clients who struggle with this problem quite often. When one salesperson moves from one firm to another, they take their entire customer base with them because the seller's client base have connected solely on a personal level, but never on a brand level. That can be really damaging to a company. So make it a practice in your sales team to include brand awareness as part of your rapport-building strategy.

### **Connect rapport with sales**

How can you determine you've successfully established a broad base of rapport with a client's company? If you can pick up the phone and call anyone in that organization and talk to anyone comfortably, then you've achieved a high level of rapport. If your personal rapport map shows that you have three people inside a company that you consider are repeat customers, and who gladly share knowledge with you, then you have a very good rapport. Those are two examples of the level of rapport that you need to aspire to attain.

Rapport building is an absolutely vital task. And I see a lot of companies who fail at this. They don't look at a business holistically. Instead, they just focus on particular aspects of a business. Avoid that mistake! Invest in developing and improving your rapport and give your business the power of 20/20 vision.