Body Language Speaks Volumes
By Dr. Kathleen A. Begley

Statistics sometimes may lie. But they sure can get across powerful messages. The most memorable statistic I ever heard was this. When human beings communicate, their words account for only 8 percent of the message. Their body language, vocal tone, spatial use, timing, and appearance account for 92 percent.

Much of this information has come from research done at the University of California at Los Angeles by a nonverbal guru named Albert Mehrabian. He theorizes that people get 55 percent of a message from its visual components, 37 percent from vocal qualities, and only 8 percent from the words.

I’m a living example of someone who recently found that actions speak louder than words. Earlier in my career, when I was a full-time writer limited to words, I earned a moderate income. When I switched to talking about writing while using a full range of gestures, visuals, and humor, my income skyrocketed.

Welcome to reality.
Bert Decker wrote an entire book on nonverbal communication called “The Art of Communicating.” In the best-seller, he hardly mentions words at all.

Instead, Decker lists nine nonverbal ingredients needed for success: eye contact, posture and movement, gestures and facial expression, dress and appearance, voice, non-words, listener involvement, humor, and the natural self.

“Eye communication is the most important skill in your personal impact toolbox,” Decker writes. “Your eyes are the only part of your central nervous system that directly connect with another person. Don’t assume that simply making eye contact is enough. Good eye communication means more than just a fleeting glance.”

So, all you entrepreneurs and executives out there, forget about the words in your networking, sales, and customer service efforts. Work on everything else.

Linda Jassmond of West Grove, a computer consultant and president of the Women’s Referral Network of Chester County, already is traveling the nonverbal route to success.

“In this age of cell phones, fax machines and e-mail, we tend to do much of our business without seeing the client, which is a mistake,” Jassmond says. “We’re missing out on the critical element: nonverbal cues including body language.

“Whenever I have something important to discuss with a client, I always do it in person. I want to see their facial expressions; if they shift in their chair; what they do with their hands. They may tell me one thing (in words) but their body language may tell me something entirely different. Seeing this helps me adjust my approach to what we’re discussing.”

Unconvinced about the power of nonverbal communication? Well think about all the common sayings that show its importance: It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it. A picture is worth 1,000 words. Practice what you preach. Do as I say, not as I do. Show me the money.

Yes, show me the money, the line actor Cuba Gooding Jr. uttered in the movie Jerry McGuire, is a recent twist on the same idea. The evidence just keeps on coming.

To be sure, some people naturally use nonverbal communication better than others. But virtually everyone can improve this critical aspect of getting our messages out. Some suggestions:

• Know the facts and figures. If you want to learn about this topic in depth, I highly recommend a college textbook called “Nonverbal Behavior in Interpersonal Relations.” Written by Virginia Richmond and James McCroskey, it’s packed with details about laboratory studies on the impact of nonverbal communication.
• Make a list of nonverbals you want to improve on. For example, you may know that you stand too stiffly while making presentations. Yoga lessons could help loosen up your stance.

• Ask others for feedback. If you have a bad habit of averting eye contact, believe me: everyone in your business and family circle knows it. Let’s face it. Shifty eyes is not a complimentary term.

• Practice in non-threatening situations. I think one of the best events to improve interpersonal skills is a wedding. Because you probably know either the bride or the groom, you’ll never see half the guests again anyway. So buck up and be aggressive with your smiling, hand-shaking, and general glad-handing.

• Work on your voice. Interesting, your voice fits into the category of nonverbal communication, not verbal. Remember, the latter term refers to words, not sounds. Tape record your voice and rate it on inflection, tone, and authority. If your voice is really nasal and irritating, consider hiring a vocal coach.

• Recognize that nonverbal communication involves both a sender and a receiver. If you cross your arms at a business meeting, you may be perceived as closed-minded. So force yourself to open up. But if you see another person crossing her arms, check out reality because that individual may just feel cold.

• Be aware that culture changes things. A hand gesture in the United States may mean something entirely different in another country. A few years ago, civil rights leader Rev. Jess Jackson found this out when he made a V for victory sign while leaving an airplane that had just landed in Africa. In that country, the gesture meant a strong variation on “up yours.”