



In retail today, connecting with the customer on a personal level is more important than ever. BY MARK OKUN

Somehow in the midst of every sales model, you will find the topic of building rapport with the customer. In the past, most of the methods suggested are a bit antiquated, manipulative, and at the very least – to the informed consumer – condescendingly transparent. Instead, I recommend that you broaden your skills and adopt *genuine* rapport.

*“Rapport is a close and harmonious relationship in which the people or groups concerned understand each other’s feelings or ideas and communicate well.”*

If you have been in the sales profession for any period of time, you have already heard that you must build rapport with the customer, get them to like you first, create a connection or bond with the customer, or that “people buy from people they like.”

Wanting to build rapport with a client has a deserved place in sales, but in the new model, rapport-building needs to shift its position in the

sales process and how it is implemented.

There is no quick way; rapport is built over time, starting *before* you ever meet a customer. It is defined by the deliberate conversations, action, and interaction you have with a client, customer, or co-worker. Much of maintaining great rapport is to keep your commitments and always follow through.

#### WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GENUINE RAPPORT AND MANIPULATION?

In genuine rapport, the other person/client is better off having met you. It is not a one way benefit.

The gurus from the dark days of selling would recommend that you feign interest with your client, and the most transparent way to fake rapport is giving an insincere compliment. While this may get a customer’s attention, it has neither the depth nor the capacity to start an ongoing relationship.

If you are able to build a good relationship with the customer, genuine compliments are always appreciated; it is the timing of the compliment that makes the difference.

#### MAKING A CONNECTION

Customers are entering your store because they want to fill a need and you have a product or service that they want and will pay for. No one goes to a store in search of a new friend or companion.

It is not the customer’s intent – or your first priority – to become personal friends at the beginning of the sales process. However, it is your job to be pleasant, interested in the customer’s needs, and to provide a high level of service. Developing rapport is aided when you demonstrate the value that you and your company bring to the customer by having interest in them.

The professional salesperson starts each day with the goal of creating new relationships. The objective is to be friendly, engaging, and interested in the customer and the solutions they seek. Always position the customer’s needs ahead of yours.

When you are focusing all your attention on the customer and the outcome they want, a feeling of connection and trust builds between you and the client. That feeling of trust will transfer in words – and silently in body language – back and forth between you as rapport develops. Some of those customers will become friends as the sales process moves forward, and others will not.

#### THE BASIC ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATION AND RAPPORT

Rapport building is impacted by the words you use, delivered in the proper tone and accented with congruent body language and appearance. Being adept at creating rapport means you must master of these basics of communication:

- Understand and practice active listening while maintaining eye contact during the conversation.

- Being aware of your appearance, and always be smiling.
- Put your ego in time out. Encourage your customers to talk.
- Develop a keen sense of the obvious.
- Holding your head up, hands visibly open, and maintaining good posture.
- Body language; yours and theirs.
- Being sincere when asking proper open-ended questions. Don’t ask boring or too many questions.
- Speak slowly and clearly, fast-talking is identified with insincerity.
- Give the client 100% of your attention – no phones, and no other distractions when interacting.

In Steven Covey’s best-selling book *Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*, Habit 5 is: **“Seek first to understand, then be understood.”** By this, the author is telling us to flip the natural order in which humans want to communicate. We all want to be “UNDERSTOOD” first, but if you want to build rapport, then that belief won’t work. You must sideline that natural feeling to be understood and foster your desire to be interested in another person.

A simple way to build genuine rapport is the use of basic thoughtfulness in deeds and words. Allowing another person the courtesy of speaking to completion without interrupting and listening intently is the act thoughtfulness.

#### FIRST AND LAST IMPRESSIONS

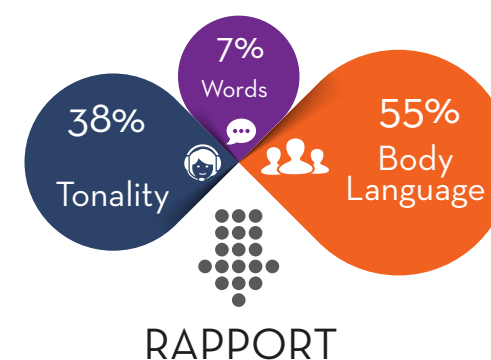
When a customer comes in to your parking lot or store does anyone *run* out to meet them or hold the door open? When exiting the store, does the salesperson serving the customer give them a “kiss goodbye” to establish a continued satisfaction once the client is gone? A great time to build that bond is when you carry out their purchase. These little courtesies go a long way in building a relationship with your customers. Since this is service beyond the norm, it also generates great word-of-mouth advertising.

#### USING TONALITY

Simply put, tonality is the HOW you say of WHAT you say. While you are not born with the *understanding* of using tonality, you have used it as soon as you began to talk. Both your internal and external voice has tonality each time you speak. A skillful use of tonality will help you excel in sales.

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#### A WINNING COMBINATION



AS SEEN IN  
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➔ **Rapport-Seeking Tonality (has an up inflection towards the end of the statement or question and often sounds sing-songy)** This tone is best used for initial greetings, seeking information, and confirmations of agreement when unsure.

➔ **Neutral Tonality (typically has a flat tone)** Neutral tones seek less to connect with the customer and are used to express information. There is no emotional attachment to the neutral tone and is often seen as a courtesy. This tone is best used when making statements of fact, such as company policies.

➔ **Command Tonality (has a down vocal inflection down at the end of the statement or question)** This tone is best used when you want to get confirmation or wish to close a sale. The command tone is powerful and - when combined with strong body language - may be overwhelming if used too often.

To practice tonality, use your smart phone's voice memo option to record yourself saying, "You want this light," using each of the three tonalities. You will hear how the request for very different actions are using the exact same words.

**EXAMPLES OF NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION:**

- ➔ Facial expression
- ➔ Appearance
- ➔ Movement
- ➔ Eye contact
- ➔ Gestures
- ➔ Posture
- ➔ Hand and Body Positioning

will put a stop to the rapport building. And please, do not speak to a customer with your arms folded or hands in your pockets!

**THE EYES HAVE IT**

How people absorb information happens in three distinct ways - and the most dominant is visual. Eye contact can speak volumes about your interest. Eye contact lets the conversation continue. Good eye contact does not mean you're staring at the person. It means that when people speak, you look at them to get the whole message.

**HAND AND BODY POSITIONS**

Whether or not it has to do with our built-in fight or flight mechanisms, hand and body positions have always been important in communication. Open upward palms when gesturing or taking in information, hands positioned relaxed and comfortably at your side or behind your back indicate an open posture. Fold your arms in front of you and you are closing yourself off to the other person. If this is a gesture you see from the customer, then they are not comfortable with you yet and are being protective.

Earlier in this article, I mentioned that rapport begins before you ever meet the customer.

The customer wants to know who they are dealing with, whether it is the manufacturer, the store, or the salesperson. They will check every review site, they will look at your BBB standing, and they might also check you out on LinkedIn, Pinterest, Facebook, and Instagram. You can't be incognito; let the world know who you are! These are steps we all must adopt to benefit from the 24/7 mentality that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century imparts upon our sales process and careers. ❖

**TIP:** If a customer has their hands out of sight or their arms folded, hand them something. Tactile sales tools must be available help the customer open up.

**BODY LANGUAGE AND NON-VERBAL CUES**

An amazing fact about communication is that 93% of our face-to-face communication with people takes place without words.

Non-verbal communication (NVC) strengthens the words we use in our presentations, but NVC is a double-edged sword. If you don't believe in what you are saying, the words will be incongruent with your body language and it is most likely you will not build rapport or sell this customer.

One of the first basic NVCs you become aware of is facial expressions. The human face can express numerous emotions, such as a raising eyebrow or narrowing one's eyes. *So much can be said without ever saying a word!*

When you are seeking connection with people, the movements, gestures, and posture you use are like a telegraph tapping out your non-verbal message. Stand tall and open; let your movements be slow, fluid, and deliberate. These actions build confidence within the customer as well as their confidence in you. Sharp motions or gestures, fumbling, or fidgeting will make the customer uneasy and break rapport. If your words say you are an expert, but your movements portray you as clumsy or ill-prepared, it



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