

When Is It Time To Stop Selling The Dress?

A bride's body language often signifies she's found "the one" – or needs space.

As a bridal retailer or manager, you've probably invested countless hours training your consultants on innumerable selling techniques. But have you ever thought about dedicating a training session to the topic of when to stop selling?

The very idea sounds insane! After all, your entire business is based on selling. But tough as it may be, sometimes you need to stop selling, or at least pause in the process to figure out how you should proceed.

When you do put on the brakes, that's the perfect time to ask your customers what they're feeling or thinking, and hope that they'll give you an honest answer. But brides are often nervous, and despite your best intentions to put them at ease, they're commonly intimidated by the wedding gown shopping process. So it's not unusual for a bride to say one thing, and yet feel or think another.

"A lot of brides, they don't know how to communicate what's on their mind," says Jim Butler, co-owner of Arizona's Bridal & Formal, a bridal business coach and author of *Bridal Profit Explosion: 12 Keys to Help You Make a Quantum Leap in the Bridal Business*

Brides are often nervous and don't know how to communicate their thoughts.

(Bridal Training and Marketing Systems, 2010). "It's a new experience for them, and it's not their fault. But 95 percent of them just don't know what to say or do."

When that happens, it's sort of like when you're driving a car and approaching a yellow caution light at an intersection, Butler says.

"You need to pause to get more information. But consultants who aren't trained properly have a tendency to rush through the yellow light instead," he says. "And that's when accidents happen."

Obviously, your job is to avoid the "accident" and help these customers. But if you're not in tune with what they're really thinking or feeling, the sales process can quickly go awry. Worse, the bride's perception of you can change instantly. In mere seconds, you can go from being an enthusiastic sales consultant to that classic pushy

one. Yikes!

One of the best ways to prevent this serious selling faux pas is to beef up your body language expertise. Reading some key silent, yet meaningful, cues can quickly provide you with powerful information that signals when you need to back off from selling, improving your odds of a successful close.

Retailers Must Know The Five Cs Of Body Language

Don't be fooled into thinking that nonverbal communication is an easy topic to master. Far more complex than simply noticing if a bride is smiling or frowning, body language is a complicated, credible field of study that plays a critical role in our understanding and trust of others.

"The thing about body language is it's so easy to misinterpret, and there are hundreds of signals," says Bob Whipple, a business author, coach, speaker and the CEO of Leadergrow (www.leadergrow.com), an organization that helps leaders develop and improve performance management.

"That's why trial lawyers hire professionals to come in and watch the witnesses," Whipple says. "That's all these

*A bride's feet will
often point toward the dress
her heart desires.*

people do is watch for changes and nuances in body language. So you have to learn the rules – what all the different things mean – and then you also have to be alert to the changes in body language, as opposed to what's absolute."

Bottom line: The more you know about body language, the better off you'll be in assessing your customers' thoughts and feelings. And there's no better place to start than with the "Five Cs of Body Language," Whipple says. Pay attention to:

1. Consistency – What is your customer continually doing that demonstrates a particular thought, mood, emotion, etc.?

2. Changes – Is your bride suddenly changing her body language, such as going from open arms to crossed arms, or from touching gowns to keeping her hands at her sides?

3. Context – What's a possible external reason for the body language you're noticing? Is the bride reacting to her mother's dominating mood, does she have somewhere else to be, or is she put off by something you just said?

4. Clusters – Can you see a number of minor body language cues adding up to create a more definitive impression? Maybe the bride's entourage hates a particular dress, but the bride is a) smiling b) parading around the store and c) twirling around as she walks about the room. (She loves it.)

5. Congruency – Do the customer's words align with her body language? If the bride says she adores a gown, for instance, but doesn't "light up" with emotion when she's wearing it, you've got a mismatch between her verbal and nonverbal cues. Either something is off with a particular aspect of the gown or it's simply not "the one."

The "Five Cs" are a good guideline for recognizing and assessing body signals. When you put these prompts to use, taking the bride's verbal communication into account as well, you'll get a more complete picture of what she thinks and feels.

Recognizing The Signs: Body Talk, Big & Small

But what about body language itself? It's simple: You need to know the "signs." And every gesture, expression and action can speak volumes about what a bride really loves as well as what she hates, according to Patti Wood (www.pattiwood.net), a body language expert, author, speaker and trainer who helps business organizations boost sales by bettering their understanding of nonverbal communication.



In addition to helping businesses, Wood has made it her career to study politicians, celebrities and everyday folks to detect truth from fiction, and decipher other communication-centric puzzles. And when it comes to bridal sales, she says, aside from some of the most recognizable body signals, there are a number of lesser-known ones that can speak volumes about how the bride is feeling, what she's thinking, and how to manage the sale.

"This is about how to read the customer. And one subtlety that's extraordinary but true is that the feet point where the heart wants to go," Wood says. "If there's a selection of dresses, look where the bride is pointing her feet. Subconsciously, the limbic brain

(emotion) has a lot of control over the feet. It will point the feet toward what it likes the most, and that's a concept I teach in sales training in retail settings."

Other significant cues relate to what Wood calls "symbolic reaching," which is done when there's fond emotional value for items or relationships. Watching for this takes more effort than tracking familiar body language signs, but it's equally important.

"It's very easy to notice eye contact or glancing, as our eyes are designed to move and linger. And you can even count the number of glances she might have toward a dress," Wood says. "But the symbolic gesturing is a little more subtle, where she is gesturing her hand toward or reaching out to particular dresses."

Just like the hands and arms, the entire body can also seemingly "reach" up when pleased or excited. It will also contract when disappointed or uninterested. Posture is the key here, more specifically when and how the body moves up and down, Wood says.

"When we're joyful, the body goes up – the smile, the shoulders, the head and even the walk as you sort of bounce... or even pirouette," she says. "When women pirouette in a dress, or do one or more of those upward motions, it's always a good sign."

To the contrary, if the bride is unsure or evaluating, the mouth, shoulders, back and even her gait will remain unelevated or physically go down.

As well, there's also an "open vs. shut" concept, which relates to what Wood has termed the "body windows." The heart and other key body windows (toe, foot, knee cap, abdomen, neck, palms, mouth and eyes) respond to and carry out actions according to what we think and feel. And once you grasp how those body windows open and shut in reaction to various external factors, it becomes obvious what a bride thinks and feels in a purchasing situation.

"We tend to open windows with something we really like and close them with what we don't like," Wood says. "So a mother or best friend may be holding a dress and showing it to the bride, and the bride is turning her heart

Understanding e-Body Language

As the prevalence of e-communications continues to rise, it's important to realize the significance of the "e-body language" that's delivered with every e-mail you send. After all, what you write and how you present your communications paints a picture of you in the recipient's mind.

Unfortunately, most people have had no training on how e-body language works or what it even means, according to Bob Whipple, a business coach, speaker and the CEO of Leadergrow (www.leadergrow.com), an organization that helps leaders develop and improve performance management.

In fact, Whipple discovered such a disconnect in people's understanding of the subject that he recently wrote an entire book on it: *The Trust Factor, Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online and Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind* (Productivity Productions, 2006).

Below are a few suggestions that Whipple says are particularly relevant to bridal retail e-communications.

- **Change your communication pattern to accommodate the differences between e-mail and face-to-face conversations.** People cannot modify content of an e-mail based on the real-time visible reaction of the other party. Instead, all information is presented at once without face-to-face feedback. Misunderstandings or hurt feelings are common. No matter how sensitive you try to be, the reader may interpret your comments as being insensitive.
- **Realize that e-mails are permanent documents.** The first finger of your hand controls your destiny. Once the "send" button is pushed, you cannot take it back, and you lose control over who views your words. The implications of this can be serious. Consider the difference between verbal and e-mail praise. When praise is given vocally, the impact is reduced over time as people tend to forget. When praise is given via e-mail, the recipient is likely to read it many times and maybe even print it out to show others. The effect is amplified. Unfortunately, the same, more lasting impact occurs on the negative side. Time often mitigates the pain of a verbal reprimand, but an e-mail reprimand tends to endure and even feel worse with time.
- **Understand the objective of a note before you write it.** What are you trying to accomplish? Make sure when you proofread a note that it will achieve your goal. Most people who annoy or anger others in notes didn't have that intention. You can eliminate problems if you clarify your objective.
- **Take a less-is-more approach because short notes are more likely to be read and understood.** Every note must be opened, read and internalized by the reader to have value. People who write long, detailed, technically perfect notes are frequently ignored by others due to the volume of information.
- **Set the tone for the entire note in the "Subject" line and the first sentence of an e-mail.** There is a momentum within notes. A poor start means the reader is likely to reject much of the content or at least become defensive. E-mails that start with the right tone are more effective.
- **Don't send messages that are written when you're angry or otherwise not yourself.** At these times, you're not the person you want to portray to the world. Wait until you've calmed down. ☺



When a bride is deliberating between dresses, stay out of her intimate zone of space.

elsewhere and is only looking with her eyes and head, and not her entire body."

The goal is to learn body windows, as well as grasp when and whether they are "open" or "closed" to guide you through the process. And then your job is to make sure you're cognizant of your nonverbal communication cues as well, so as not to overwhelm, push or offend your customer in any way.

"It could be as simple as respecting body space," she says. "When the brides have narrowed the choices down to two or three dresses, and they're deliberating, that would be a time to make sure you're out of their intimate 'zone of space,' which in American culture is now about 18 inches from their body."

She continues, "And particularly when it's an emotionally charged situation, you stay on the outer edge of that 18 inches, with the possibility of gesturing or motioning toward the dress you think is the best. That way, you give affection toward the dress that you think is the best choice rather than pushing it toward the customer."

In The Sound Of Silence Cues And Clues Unfold

There's no doubt that bridal consultants have a tough job. Not only must they have thorough knowledge of the product they're selling, but they also need to be experts in navigating the fragile sales process.

Fortunately, it's possible to generate better sales simply by beefing up communication skills, specifically by learning how to read a whole host of body language cues.

Remember, sometimes what's not said can be as powerful, if not more important, than the spoken word. But if you don't know what cues to look for, how to interpret these clues, or how to respond respectfully with proper body language etiquette, you can shatter the odds of winning a sale.

So take the time to train your consultants to develop these high-level communication skills, and you're likely to find the effort will pay off in the form of stronger sales. ☺