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CHAPTER

1

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# Your Actions Speak Louder than Your Words

*Speak (verb) 5a. To convey a message by nonverbal means:  
Actions speak louder than words.*

—*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*  
Fourth Edition, 2000

## **Audience Advocacy**

One of the most important concepts I teach my private clients is Audience Advocacy, a viewpoint that asks you, the presenter, to become an advocate for your audience. Put yourself into your audience's place and think about their hopes, fears, and passions. Consider what your audience knows about you and your message or cause, and what they need to know in order to respond favorably to you, to act on your call to action.

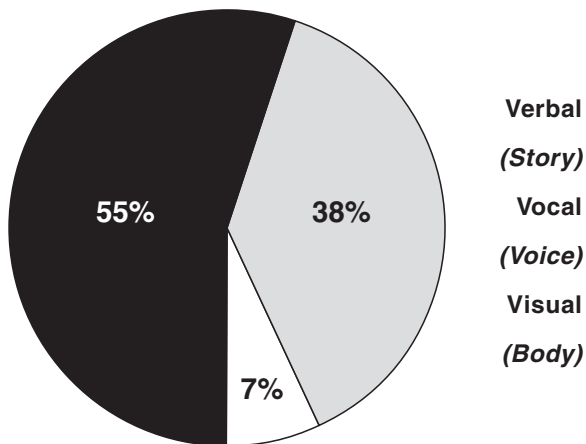
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All these factors are a measure of how your audience responds to you intellectually. Yet Audience Advocacy applies equally to how your audience responds to you interpersonally; to the physical delivery of your story via your body language and your voice. In this view, your audience's perception of you then widens from their minds to include their eyes and their ears, and even more deeply, their guts. How do they *feel* about you?

Think of the presenter and the audience as the beginning and ending points of *all* interpersonal communications; then think of the presenter as a transmitter and the audience as a receiver. The presenter transmits a set of dynamics—human dynamics—that can be summed up in three Vs:

- *Verbal*. The story you tell.
- *Vocal*. Your voice, or how *you* tell your story.
- *Visual*. The third dynamic refers not to your Microsoft PowerPoint slides, but to *you*, your body language, and *what* you do when you tell your story.

Your audiences are affected by these three dynamics to varying degrees. Their relative impact is seen in the pie chart in Figure 1.1.

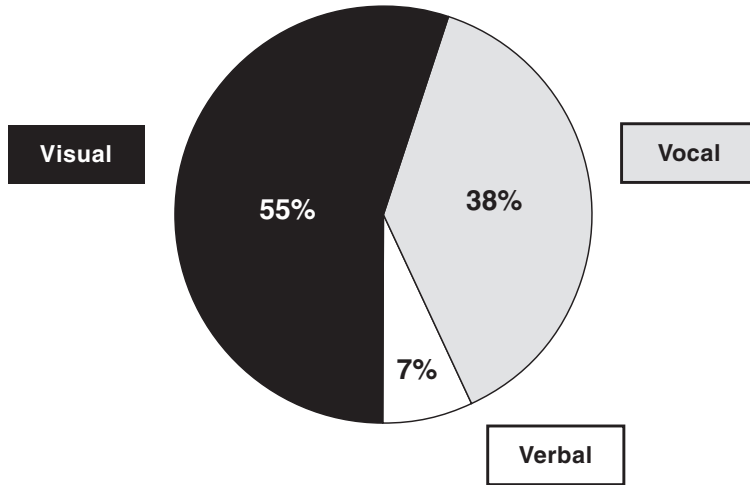


**Figure 1.1** The Relative Impact of Human Dynamics Query

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The largest wedge is in black at 55 percent; moving clockwise, the middle one in gray is at 38 percent, and the smallest wedge is in white at 7 percent. You'll note that the labels are not connected to the wedges. How do you think they rank? Which has the greatest impact? Which has the least? We've left the rest of this page blank for you to think about the question. You'll find the answer on the next page in Figure 1.2.

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**Figure 1.2** The Relative Impact of Human Dynamics

The largest wedge is the Visual at 55 percent; moving clockwise, the middle wedge, the Vocal, is 38 percent, and the smallest, the Verbal, is 7 percent. The body language has the greatest impact, the voice, next, while the story has the least impact.\*

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\*These dynamics are my variation of a widely known 1981 study called “Silent Messages,” conducted by Professor Albert Mehrabian of the Department of Psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles. The findings in “Silent Messages” were: “Total liking = 7% verbal liking + 38% vocal liking + 55% facial liking.” Professor Mehrabian also specifically limited his findings to “apply only when a person is communicating about emotions and definitely do not apply to communication in general.”<sup>1</sup>

I have extended “facial liking” to include the entire array of Visual aspects: the eyes, features, head, hands, arms, and posture. I have also widened my view to how these factors impact *all* forms of human communication, ranging from person-to-person conversation all the way through to our primary focus, presentations, and speeches. Furthermore, I intend to demonstrate that all of these human encounters do indeed involve emotion. In fact, as you’ll discover in the next chapter, emotion is present in *all* interpersonal communication *involuntarily*; a powerful dynamic proven by other scientific studies made more than a decade after Professor Mehrabian’s work.

## Impact

Surprised? You're not alone. For the past 20 years, I've been showing this pie chart—without the labels—to my private clients and asking them the same question I just asked you. Although I haven't kept a formal tally, I can safely tell you that the large majority of them were also surprised by the answer.

Given the amount of time and effort that most presenters and speakers expend scribbling on yellow legal pads, pounding away at their computers, or shuffling their slides in preparation for their mission-critical presentations, they assume that content is paramount; but at the Moment of Truth, the story takes third place behind the body language and the voice.

There is ample support for these dynamics, starting with the examples of the impact of delivery skills in the IPO and political arenas you read about in the introduction, and continuing with a string of further evidence from other arenas in the balance of this chapter.

Consider Ronald Reagan, known as the “Great Communicator,” and deservedly so for his peerless skills as a public speaker. No president in history of the United States achieved the level of popularity ratings that Reagan did. During his eight years in office (1981 to 1989) he brought personality to the forefront of presidential qualities. In an office that previously had been occupied by professional politicians, former generals, or career bureaucrats. Reagan's persona radiated a subtle but irresistible charisma that held the national news media, the electorate—and every audience he ever faced—in his thrall.

The measure of Reagan's impact was best expressed in a reaction to what was to be his presidential swan song: a pass-the-baton speech in support of his imminent replacement, then-Vice President George

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H.W. Bush. On August 15, 1988, at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans, the assembled delegates in the enormous Louisiana Superdome, and the even more enormous prime-time television audience, watched enchanted as Reagan poured on the charm.

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*With George Bush, I'll know as we approach the new millennium our children will have a future secure with a nation at peace and protected against aggression. We'll have a prosperity that spreads to the blessings of our abundance and opportunity that spreads across all America. We'll have safe and active neighborhoods, drug-free schools that send our children soaring in the atmosphere of great ideas and deep values. And a nation, confidently willing to take its leadership into the uncharted reaches of a new age. So George, I'm in your corner. I'm ready to volunteer . . .*

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The partisan crowd in the Superdome interrupted, rising to their feet to roar their approval and flourish their blue and white "Bush '88" banners in a tidal wave of affection. Reagan smiled humbly and, then, with exquisite graciousness, continued:

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*. . . I'm ready to volunteer a little advice now and then, offer a pointer or two on strategy. If asked. I'll help keep the facts straight or just stand back and cheer; but, George, just one personal request . . .*

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At this point Reagan paused for dramatic effect, his eyes crinkling and his lips pursing. Then his lips parted into that classic sunny smile (Video Frame 1.1).



**Video Frame 1.1** Ronald Reagan Endorses George H.W. Bush

### Note

To see this live video clip from Ronald Reagan's speech with commentary, please visit [www.powerltd.com/tpp](http://www.powerltd.com/tpp) and use the pass code you saw in the introduction.

Now Reagan resumed delivering the big payoff to his speech with his trademark signature phrase:

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*Go out there and win one for the Gipper!*<sup>2</sup>

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Among the viewers of the nationwide telecast was the Pulitzer Prize-winning television critic of the *Los Angeles Times*, Howard Rosenberg, who summed up his reaction in his column the next day.

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*There is a critical moment early in every Reagan speech when his physical presence begins to eclipse his words—when you begin watching more and hearing less—feeling more and thinking less. Look and mood completely take over. That presence on TV: just the sight of him cocking his head with his sincere grin and lopsided hair, is still worth a thousand words and millions of votes.<sup>3</sup>*

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The Visual dominated the Vocal and the Verbal.

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An equally powerful, but converse example of Howard Rosenberg's reaction to Ronald Reagan comes from Oliver Sacks, a prominent physician (professor of Clinical Neurology and Clinical Psychiatry at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons), and also a prominent author. In his bestselling book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*, Dr. Sacks described his work with *aphasic* (brain-damaged) patients. In one incident, Dr. Sacks entered a ward to find most of the patients there watching President Reagan deliver a speech on television and *laughing at him hysterically*.

Dr. Sacks explained:

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*Why all this? Because speech—natural speech—does not consist of words alone. . . . It consists of utterance—an uttering- forth of one's whole meaning with one's whole being—the understanding of which involves infinitely more than mere word recognition. And this was the clue to aphasics' understanding, even when they might be wholly uncomprehending of words as such. For though the words, the verbal constructions, per se, might convey nothing, spoken language is normally suffused with "tone," embedded in an expressiveness which transcends the verbal.<sup>4</sup>*

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**The Visual dominates the Vocal and the Verbal.**

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As further evidence of these dynamics, let's turn back to September 23, 1960, a day at the height of the Cold War. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, the contentious leader of the Communist bloc, had come to New York to attend a session of the United Nations General Assembly. During a speech by the British Prime Minister Khrushchev, who was seated in the audience, angrily pounded his fists on the desk, disrupting the session. When he stepped up to the green marble podium to deliver his own speech, Khrushchev unleashed a vehement attack against the West, the United Nations, and particularly, against the United States.

Most of the delegates in that international audience had only Khrushchev's body language, the 55 percent to react to. They certainly did not understand his Russian, the 7 percent nor did they have his own voice, the 38 percent, as they heard only an interpreter's translation of his words via headphones. But Khrushchev's powerfully expressive gestures left no doubt whatsoever about his message (Video Frame 1.2).



**Video Frame 1.2** Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev at the United Nations

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### Note

To see this live video clip from Nikita Khrushchev's speech with commentary, please visit [www.powerltd.com/tpp](http://www.powerltd.com/tpp) and use the pass code you saw in the introduction.

Khrushchev's dramatic presentation was so memorable that when, 46 years later, during another session of the United Nations General Assembly, Hugo Chavez, the contentious president of Venezuela, stood at that same green marble podium and delivered a fiery attack on the United States, the *New York Times* called it "A Speech That Khrushchev or Arafat or Che Would Admire."<sup>5</sup>

As memorable was Khrushchev's 1960 speech in New York, an even more memorable rhetorical event took place just three days later in Chicago: Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy, respectively the Republican and Democratic candidates for president, met in the first-ever televised election debate. Nixon, the favorite, appeared nervous and rigid, while Kennedy, the underdog, appeared confident and poised. The day after the debate, their positions in the public opinion polls reversed. You'll see this encounter analyzed in detail in chapter 7, but, taken together, both events vividly demonstrate how the *Visual dynamics dominate both the Vocal and Verbal; or, why actions speak louder than words*.

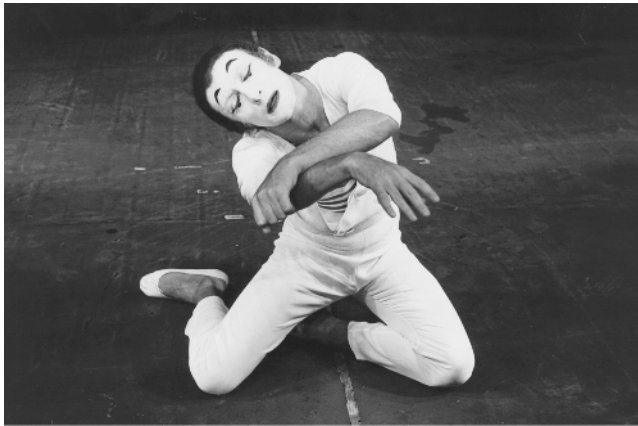
### Actions Speak Louder Than Words

*Actions* are the Visual, the 55 percent; *speak* is the Vocal, the 38 percent; and *words* are the Verbal, the 7 percent.

For the purest example of these dynamics, let's turn to a form of communication in which *only* the Visual element exists: pantomime. This ancient art, which had its origins in classical Greek and Roman drama and its development in sixteenth-century Italian *commedia*

*dell'arte*, does not involve either the Vocal or the Verbal dynamic. In mime, the body language alone tells the entire story silently and accounts for 100 percent of the impact.

The most famous example of this art is seen in the work of one of the world's greatest mimes, Marcel Marceau. For decades, Marceau captivated audiences around the globe with his wordless performances. One in particular was his portrayal of the ages of man in a piece called "Birth, Youth, Maturity, Old Age, and Death." Mr. Marceau began the sequence curled up in the fetal position and then, slowly, in one unbroken sequence, opened up and became a toddling infant. Continuing fluidly, he stretched his limbs and the infant transformed into a strapping young man, striding vigorously ahead in place. But soon his strides slowed down, his shoulders hunched over, and he became an old man, doddering forward until he concluded in a shriveled ball, a mirror image of the fetal position at the start. (Photograph 1.1)



**Photograph 1.1** Marcel Marceau

"One critic said, 'He accomplishes in less than two minutes what most novelists cannot do in volumes.'"<sup>6</sup>

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### Note

To see a video of another mime, please visit [www.powerltd.com/tpp](http://www.powerltd.com/tpp) and use the pass code you saw in the introduction.

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Actions speak louder than words. The Visual dominates the Vocal and the Verbal.

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To bring these dynamics from the stage to the real world, try this simple exercise: Ask a colleague or friend to be your audience for a very brief presentation. Then step up to the front of the room and start to speak, but do so silently, moving your lips without using your voice. As you do, slouch, put your weight on one foot, thrust your hands deep into your pockets, and dart your eyes rapidly around the room. Next, suddenly, while continuing to move your lips silently, stand up straight, look directly at your colleague, address all of your energies to him or her, and extend your hand toward that person, as if you were about to shake hands.

Then stop the exercise and ask your trial audience member to react. Undoubtedly, the person will respond negatively to the first part of your exercise and positively to the second. The response will be solely to your Visual dynamics.

For scientific validation of this phenomenon, we turn to David McNeill, professor emeritus, Departments of Psychology and Linguistics at the University of Chicago, who conducted studies in a subject he called, “communicative effects of speech-mismatched gestures.” The subjects in the study were shown a videotape in which speakers told a story, but with gestures that differed oddly from the content. After the story, the subjects were asked to retell the story from memory. The subjects described what they *saw*, rather than what they *heard*. They described the gestures, not the words.<sup>7</sup>

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The irony is that most presenters and speakers spend most of their time and effort on the Verbal content. Therefore, am I suggesting that you should forget about the art of telling your story and focus on your delivery skills? Not at all. Put equal emphasis on *both* sides of the equation, as much on your body language and your voice as on your story; as much on the messenger as on the message.

Think of the elements of the equation as a delivery system and a payload. NASA expends millions of dollars and thousands of hours building a communications satellite. If the satellite is launched by a rocket that does not have sufficient boost, the satellite does not go into orbit. Your company or organization expends many dollars and countless hours preparing to launch a product, a service, or a campaign for a cause. That is the priceless payload. *You* are the delivery system. The *style* of your presentation must support the priceless *substance* of *your* message.

Launch your payload into orbit.

