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THE LOOK AND SOUND OF CREDIBILITY

Nicole is a star. Everyone says so. She's very nearly at the top of her game and only forty years old. She's married to a great guy, and they have two kids. I know just how highly she is regarded by the CEO. But her story wasn't always this upbeat. Eight years ago she nearly blew it. She's spent the last few years digging herself out of a huge credibility crater. What did she do that was so bad?

Nicole and her husband had decided they didn't want a houseful of "things." They wanted a simpler life. But their desire for a simpler life and the reality of life crashed into each other when she was promoted to vice president and her company gave her a very generous gift: a John Lennon original lithograph from a very exclusive Fifth Avenue gallery. Nicole decided to return the lithograph and take the cash.

The gallery owner gave Nicole the cash value and then called the person who had put the order in to let her know that the receiver wanted cash. The gallery owner thought the purchaser of such a gift should know. Unfortunately, that person was the wife of the biggest original investor in Nicole's company. It didn't seem right to her that Nicole should be returning what was felt to be a personal gift... a very personal gift. The investor's wife was miffed. She was a traditionalist from the old school. One simply didn't return a gift like that. News of her displeasure was passed on to the CFO, who passed it on to the CEO. What started as a desire to simplify her life ended up complicating Nicole's ambitions. The buyer thought she was ungrateful and just plain stupid.

Nicole asked me one day, "Do you think I need to do something about this? Will this hurt my career?" I told her to go back to the

gallery, reacquire the lithograph, and write a note explaining why she'd returned it. The note she wrote said, "I wasn't raised to appreciate fine art. Growing up, our family saw fine art as something for people who had more education and, frankly, more money. I think that's why I've felt a little uncomfortable aspiring to own art and a little embarrassed at the thought of accepting something like that as a gift. I thought my parents would point to this piece on my wall as perhaps 'forgetting where I came from.' Please forgive my thoughtlessness." That note helped Nicole get back on track.

I told Nicole that some people would call what she did a mistake. Some would say she just didn't use common sense. Some would say she showed a lack of EQ. Some police officers might have seen her leaving the shop and said, "She looks kind of hinky."

People Pick Up on the Most Subtle Body Motions

Why "hinky"? A few years ago I taught communication programs with police officers from the Los Angeles Police Department and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. One night I heard them use the word "hinky," as in "He looked hinky." The officers agreed that after you've gained a certain amount of experience on the job, you get a feeling, a feeling you can't put your finger on, that someone is not acting right, not driving right, not walking right. They call that hinky. The feeling comes from a well-developed ability to read non-verbal communication, or body language. (By the way, one of the officers told me that a person who touches his or her face while answering an officer's questions is probably just nervous and probably not lying. A liar, he argued, gets pretty good at controlling nervous tics. A truth teller is simply nervous at finding herself in a situation with a police officer and shows it by touching or scratching her face.)

In *Human Communication* (Burgoon, Hunsaker, & Dawson, 1994), the authors repeat a notion I had heard many times in class:

[Sixty] percent of the social meaning in interpersonal interchange is transmitted nonverbally. When someone says, 'I could tell from his

eyes that he was angry' or 'Her voice made it clear that we were finished talking,' he or she is actually responding to nonverbal communication. Adults also give great weight to nonverbal cues when verbal and nonverbal messages are contradictory. Imagine talking to a friend who insists she is not angry yet her lips are pursed and she moves away every time you try to get close to her. Are you likely to believe her words or her actions?

Once my original partners and I began professional practice, we heard clients described in simple terms like these:

"He looks arrogant."

"He looks smart."

"He looks confident."

"She looks friendly."

"She looks energetic."

"He looks decisive."

"He looks credible."

Think about the phrase, "He looks smart." So simple sounding, but how does one reach such a conclusion? Is it the clothes? Is it the grooming? Is it the glasses? Is it the high forehead? Is it the facial expression he makes when he's listening?

Now we also heard these phrases:

"He sounds arrogant."

"He sounds smart."

"He sounds confident."

"She sounds friendly."

"She sounds energetic."

"He sounds decisive."

"He sounds credible."

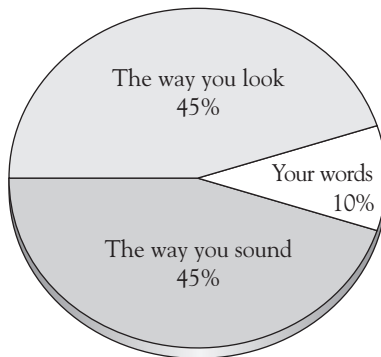
Think about the statement, “He sounds smart.” Is it the numbers he quotes? Is it the “big words” he uses? Is it the absence of “uhhh” and “ummm”?

When my son was a baby, now and then a stranger would say, “Your baby is so smart.” How would anyone know a baby was smart? It could have been the way he pronounced his baby talk. If baby talk is clear, that baby will be called a smart baby. Maybe instead of “Da Da” he said, “Dr. Dada.” Now it might have been his facial expression. He might have been unusually alert looking. (Matt, can you forgive me for using you as an example?) And it remains that way through life. Someone who is “well spoken” will be thought smart.

We noticed that people who described our clients were just as quick to say “She looks credible” as they were to say “She sounds credible.” Interestingly enough, they were not as quick to say “She uses words that show credibility.” Figure 1.1 sums up our discoveries about perception based on body language or based on the way someone sounded.

It is very important that I affirm the meaning of this little pie chart. I am not suggesting that only 10 percent of your message and its meaning comes through in your content. I am suggesting that only 10 percent of the *criticism* of your message is tied directly to the

Figure 1.1. Credibility Doesn't Depend on Word Choice.



choice of one word versus another. There are exceptions, as you will read here, but those only serve to highlight the rule.

Some of us are visually oriented and clearly pay more attention to the way our colleagues look. Actually, I would rather put it this way: some of us have an eye for things. You might have an eye for graphic design, for instance. Others are more aware of the aural. They focus more on the way their colleagues sound. Or, to put it in the same terms, they have an ear for things, just as one might have an ear for music. Please note, though, that even if some of us are visually oriented, it's easy to get focused on the way someone sounds if it really sticks out—and vice versa.

I am vaguely suspicious of the idea that students ought to be taught in a way that caters to their learning preference. I think the teacher in us should be clever in the way we explain things so that we delight our listener's eyes *and* ears. And we certainly should be able to explain something without resorting to PowerPoint. Can you imagine the look on my wife's face if I were to say, "Let's talk about where we're going to come up with the money for College X versus College Y. I know you are a 'visual learner,' so I've set up a presentation in the dining room." She would think I had drunk the Kool-Aid. Believe me, she would pick up from the look on my face and the sound of my voice that I have concerns. A visual person could still say, "You sounded serious." An aural person would still say, "You painted a pretty clear picture for me."

If a speaker has a lot of vocal tics, such as the aforementioned "umms" and "uhhs," any of us, including visually oriented people, might begin to focus on that. Even if we tend to pay more attention to the way someone sounds, we would still be likely to get distracted by the look on that person's face when he or she is answering questions. One quality or another is always the subject of intense focus while other qualities remain hazy or unfocused.

All of us would like to control what everyone else focuses on. No doubt most of us would prefer that people pay attention to our message and not be distracted by the way we look or sound.

I once heard a poet talking about the impact of a reader noticing an error, spelling or otherwise, in a poem. He said, “It brings you to the surface.” You realize that he wants his reader to be immersed in the work. It’s troubling to the poet if you notice some mistake that snaps you out of that depth and brings you back to mundane reality. The same thing can be said of a presenter or conversationalist in a meeting. Whether it’s “uhhhs” or a mispronounced word in a speech, it takes the listener out of the flow of things and “brings him to the surface.”

As each chapter of *So Smart But . . .* unfolds, you will see that my suggestions will focus either on a behavior that will make you *look* credible or one that will make you *sound* credible. I’ll have tips on the words you should use too. But, again, thinking back to the pie chart, you need to remember that generally speaking, you are not judged for the specific words you choose as much as you are for the way you look or the way you sound. The totality of the message—the way it is organized and expressed—is critical. But the choice of, say, “good” instead of “great” is not worth the time and effort communicators put into thinking about it. Please keep in mind that I am not talking about words that reflect poor grammar. Those count. You will read about one such mistake (of mine) in the section after next.

The Way You Look

Researchers have studied seven separate categories related to how you look. Your perceived credibility can be affected by any one of them. You’ll be surprised to see that there is a lot more to this than simply the way you dress. Here are the categories and little comments we’ve heard about each one of them.

1. The way you use personal space—proxemics. “She stands too close to me.”
2. The way you touch others—haptics. “He has a weak handshake.”

3. The way you use time—chronemics. “She’s never late with a deliverable.”
4. Your facial expression—oculesics. “If you’re feeling happy, tell your face.”
5. The way you move your body—kinesics. “His posture was very relaxed.”
6. The way you dress, the way you groom yourself, *and* your body size—physical appearance. “The fact that he’s so overweight tells me his life is not in balance.”
7. The way you decorate your space—artifacts. “Her office is so obsessively organized that she must not have time for real work.”

Some of my clients think that anyone who would judge them based solely on how they look must be vapid and shallow. Maybe so, but it’s simply human nature to be distracted by such things. I’ve often said to seminar participants, “If you have a message that is very, very, very compelling, people will not be distracted by the way you look. But if your message is just so-so, you are opening yourself up to these kinds of distractions. A compelling message, delivered in a compelling way, will be immune to distraction.” How do you make your message compelling and credible? That question is answered in this book.

The Way You Sound

A few years ago, in a piece of performance feedback I received after a seminar, someone said, “Whatever happened to the verb, ‘to say’? You, Dr. Weiner, used ‘to go’ instead of properly using ‘to say.’ To quote you, you said, ‘I told the man that he should speak with more energy, and he goes, “It was as energetic as I can be.” You are a communication consultant and should know better!” Of course, he was right. And he is proof that the things you say, the seemingly smallest errors, can dramatically alter someone’s perception of your credibility.

We have studied twelve categories related to how you sound:

1. The volume of your voice. “He sounds meek.”
2. The tone of your voice. “She was dripping with sarcasm.”
3. The speed of your voice. “He sounded tired.”
4. The length of your sentences. “She sounded indecisive.”
5. Your grammar. “He sounded uneducated. Send the next candidate in.”
6. Your accent. “She sounds so intelligent. Let’s give her the offer.”
7. Your vocabulary. “He has to tailor his message to his audience.”
8. Your pronunciation. “Why does she keep saying ‘orientated’? It’s ‘oriented.’ She’s not well read.”
9. Your logic. “I couldn’t follow his train of thought. He sounds totally lost.”
10. Your data. “We’ll need better data than that! He sounds unprepared.”
11. Your syntax. “Boy. Just one simple sentence now and then would be so nice. She’s way too detailed.”
12. Your little vocal tics. “He was, uh, clearly, uh, nervous.”

It can be daunting to realize how many behaviors your listeners can pick up on, behaviors they have an ear for. If you’re lucky, your listener might forgive your speaking idiosyncrasies. But you may be in a situation where a listener catches every nuance, just as my listener called me on the wrong verb. Good luck.

You Cannot Not Communicate

The folks who think about you and your communication style—your boss, your peers, your direct reports, your clients and customers, your significant others and children, your friends—don’t

quit watching when you stop talking. You are under the microscope when you listen, when you walk, and when you sit. I remember my father admonishing me once after watching me with my toddler: “Don’t worry about whether he’s listening to you. Just remember that he is always watching you.” Although “You cannot not communicate” is a phrase attributed to Dr. Paul Watzlawick, a very famous psychotherapist who taught at Stanford University, my dad, Hyman Weiner the haberdasher, got it right too.

So now we add another factor to the credibility equation. People are evaluating how you look and how you sound not only when you are *talking* but also when you are *listening*. If we express this idea in the form of a matrix, it looks like Figure 1.2.

Say, for instance, that you conduct a 360° feedback for a subordinate. When it comes back to her, your subordinate reads that she can be closed-minded once she has arrived at her point of view. She reads that she is not open to the views of others. She reads that some people think that, while she is listening, it is clear that she is formulating her response.

When it is time for you to go over the feedback with her, she says to you, “Can you give me some input on what I am doing that makes people feel this way?” You could show her a filled-in version of the matrix, as shown in Figure 1.3.

Your subordinate says, “So I give off this closed-minded vibe even when I’m not saying a thing?” You would say, “Yes. It comes

Figure 1.2. You’re Always Projecting Impressions.

	How you look	How you sound
While talking		
While listening		

Figure 1.3. Examples of Projecting Impressions.

	How you look	How you sound
While talking	Very little animation. No eye contact. Dismissive hand gestures.	Clipped speech. Abrupt speech. No-nonsense language.
While listening	Head stock still. No body movement.	Total silence. Abrupt answers.

through in your body language and in the abruptness of your answers to people’s questions. It is having an impact on your credibility.”

So Smart and So SMART

As a student, I loved reading and doing studies about the behavior of a source, or sender, of a message. I also loved the research about the message itself. How does the source look and sound? How does the message look and sound? But as they used to say in advertisements for the Ginsu Knife, “But wait! That’s not all!”

There are actually five interesting ways to study credibility. In addition to the source (S) and the message (M), you can investigate the arena (A) where communication takes place. You can look at the nature of the receivers (R) of the message and whether you are targeting the right ones in the first place. Finally, you can look at the timing (T) of the action. (Haven’t you heard people say, for instance, that feedback should be given to a person as soon as possible after the behavior? That’s a timing issue.) Put all five of these elements together, and you get a great acronym to start your journey: SMART.

Suppose, for example, that you’ve received some feedback saying that you’ve lost your colleague’s trust. Take out a pen, draw a little chart along the lines of Figure 1.4, and think through the problem using SMART to assess your credibility.

Figure 1.4. Evaluating a Loss of Trust.

Style	Is my body language sending the wrong signal?
Message	Did I say something that sounded disingenuous?
Arena	Did I speak up in the wrong place?
Receiver	Did I pick the wrong person to share something with?
Timing	Did I speak up at the wrong time?

So many clients have asked me how to further develop their sense of sight for the way they, and others, look or their sense of hearing for the way they and others sound. I tell them, “Keep your ears open for the way novel writers create messages for their characters in a novel and your eyes open for the way actors eventually portrayed those characters.” You’re going to read some great examples right here in *So Smart But . . .*

