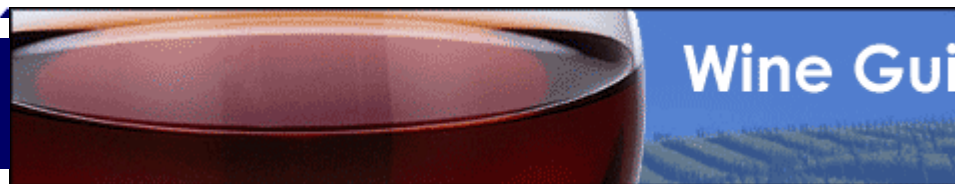


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The San Diego Union-Tribune.

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First impressions depend on firm grip on body language

By Analisa Nazareno
SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS

July 15, 2004

In business settings, the handshake that connotes confidence, sincerity and openness goes like this: right hand extended and vertical, a firm but not a crushing grip, and in Texas, three or four full pumps up and down. On the East Coast, it's three to five shorter, quicker pumps. And in California, it's one or two quick pumps.

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So says communications specialist Patti Wood, who trains businessmen on improving their presentation skills, and who frequently interprets the body language of the rich and powerful for the media.

"It's not the firmness so much as the fact that the palm of your hand has full contact with the palm of the other person's hand," Wood says.

She argues that it takes 90 seconds for someone to formulate an opinion about another person based on first impressions. Those 90 seconds are crucial and hard to erase. You can script what you say, but it's harder to control how you say it.

The formal study of body language and nonverbal communication began

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in earnest during the 1950s, with the publication of "Introduction to Kinesics," written by Ray Birdwhistell.

Since then, several have been written about hand movements, intercultural nonverbal communication, and something called "paralinguistics," or the study of the voice.

Perhaps the most accessible of texts includes the recently published "Field Guide to Gestures: How to Identify and Interpret Every Gesture Known to Man," by Nancy Armstrong and Melissa Wagner.

Like apes and bears, the powerful and those aspiring for power try to dominate a social interaction by taking up as much space as possible, broadening their shoulders, standing with their feet apart or sitting with their legs spread out.

When shaking hands, some try to dominate that interaction by forcing his or her hand on top in a horizontal position, rather than a vertical, equal position, others by squeezing harder than necessary.

"You can never take one gesture or one eye movement or posture and say this means that," Foster said. "One of the things with nonverbal communication is that it is notoriously ambiguous. If people try to read other people and assume that they know because they've done a one-to-one translation, you're on the wrong track. Nonverbal communication can mean a lot of different things."

Nevertheless, people often make quick assumptions because of how they've interpreted nonverbal cues. And in important situations, such as job interviews, people rely heavily on their interpretations of body language.

Wood advises job candidates to smile sincerely as they give a firm and formal equal-power handshake, both at the beginning and the closing of an interview.

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