

Interpersonal Communication

This chapter will enable you to:

- ▶ Be aware of the importance of listening, nonverbal cues, and speaking in interpersonal communication.
- ▶ Gauge your own skills and areas that need improvement.
- ▶ Know strategies and techniques for more effective listening, nonverbal communication, and speaking.

Interpersonal communication is the interaction between two or more people. While written communication and public speaking are mostly about one-way communication, interpersonal communication involves receiving as well as delivering a message. This type of communication includes listening and nonverbal communication as well as speaking. As a farmers market manager, you probably spend more time using communication skills—with vendors, board members, customers, community members—than any other kind of skill.

Effective Listening Skills

Listening can be described as the ability to understand and respond effectively to oral communication. People generally spend more hours listening each day than writing, reading, and speaking combined. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we are always hearing things. But we are not listening unless we concentrate and try to understand what we are hearing; unlike hearing, listening is an active process. We have to evaluate what we hear and make some effort to get the message that is being imparted.

The ability to listen effectively is a crucial communication skill. We spend about 45 percent of our working hours listening. Furthermore, unless you have trained yourself to be a stronger listener, you likely only listen at about 25 percent efficiency. It is possible to improve your listening skills with practice. Here are some suggestions that can increase your capacity to listen.

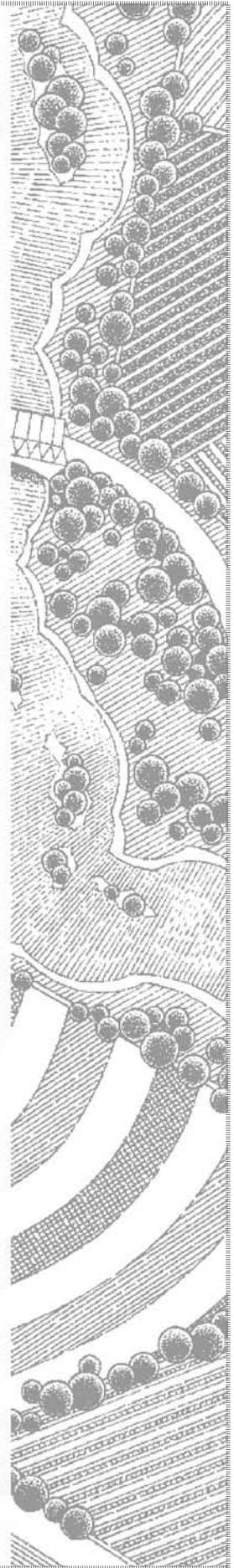
- **Realize that listening is work.** It takes concentration to listen. You have to be able to put aside the other things on your mind and on your desk to understand what the person is saying.
- **Prepare to listen.** The first step to take in the listening process is to stop talking. Many people forget this. You cannot hear anything if you keep talk-



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ing. If you have more to say, wait until the other person finishes his or her statement before you start talking again.

- **Keep an open mind.** It is important to keep preconceptions out of the way while you are listening. If you think you already know everything the other person is going to say or you do not like them because they have, for instance, different political views than you, you will not be open to the message they are trying to convey.
- **Do not let your emotions get in the way.** Often when someone says something controversial or emotionally laden, we stop listening because we begin to feel emotional. It is important, however, to concentrate and try to neutralize the emotional trigger before it blocks the message from being received.
- **Empathize; do not direct.** When people bring ideas or problems to you, they want to know that you understand their perspectives. An empathetic response, such as a knowing smile or an encouraging nod, fosters more open communication. Do not, however, insert so much of yourself into the situation that you unintentionally shut down the speaker. Coming to you with a problem does not necessarily mean wanting the problem fixed; it may be that the person simply wants to be heard and understood. If someone wants your opinion, be prepared to give it honestly. You need to judge the degree to which the person wants to know what you think. It is better to communicate that you have clearly understood what was said than to try to change the person's opinion.
- **Try not to get distracted.** Sometimes in the process of hearing someone else's ideas, we get sidetracked and start brainstorming in our heads about a particularly interesting aspect of the topic. Try to avoid going off on a mental tangent or composing your response until the speaker has finished talking. You can always leave the meeting or conversation and write your ideas down later. You will miss much of what is being said if you do not stay focused on the person speaking to you.
- **Maintain a listening posture.** The physical position of your body is important while you are listening. If you let your eyes wander or you slouch in your chair while someone is speaking to you, this can be interpreted as lack of interest and the person is likely to tell you less. Do not shut down your speaker by gazing out the window. Maintain eye contact and sit up. The importance of body language is covered in more detail later in this chapter.



Nonverbal Communication

Body language, eye contact, expressions, and gestures: nonverbal cues are very important in communication. While it may seem that words are the most effective way to get a point across, it is actually the way we hold our bodies and the facial expressions that we use that determine how our messages are received by others. Say an acquaintance tells you that she really enjoys her job but does not look you in the eye while saying it and keeps her arms crossed in a defensive manner. Would you believe the words? Or would you wonder if what she said was not exactly in line with how she felt?

When you communicate with someone in front of you, the message delivery and receipt occur on two levels simultaneously—verbally and nonverbally. If the messages sent on these two levels are incongruous, the nonverbal message will likely override or at least give different meaning to the spoken message. For this reason, it is important to be aware of body language you use when communicating with others. Awareness of these signs will help you understand the people with whom you communicate as well. Following are some aspects of nonverbal communication to consider.

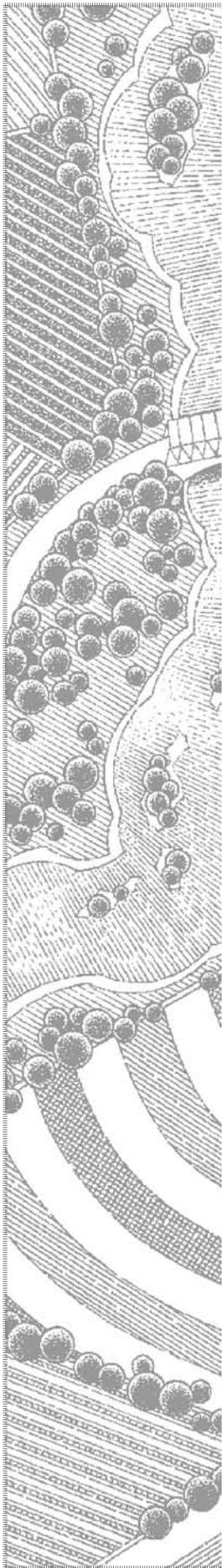
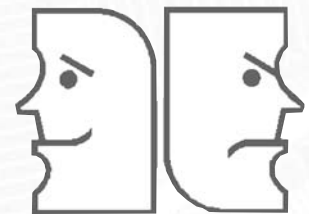
Physical Orientation

These types of nonverbal cues include:

- The distance you keep between yourself and someone else.
- The way your body is oriented in relation to someone else (face to face or side to side).
- Your physical posture (slouching or standing tall; arms crossed or relaxed by your side).
- The amount of physical contact you use (patting someone on the back or shaking hands).

Facial and Physical Gestures

- Facial expressions such as smiling or grimacing and a lack of expression all convey messages to your audience. Expressions can change frequently during a conversation and are constantly, often unconsciously interpreted by those around you.



- Eye contact is a telling form of nonverbal communication. If you do not look someone in the eye, that person may sense that you are trying to hide something. If you purposely avoid eye contact, this signals a lack of interest in talking to someone or an attempt to end a tedious conversation. Constant and direct eye contact, however, is perceived as a sign of aggression; in U.S. culture, listeners and speakers tend to look near rather than directly into each other's eyes.
- Physical gestures include moving your hands, waving your arms, and clenching your fists. These types of cues can be very hard to control because often we are not aware of how frequently we do them.

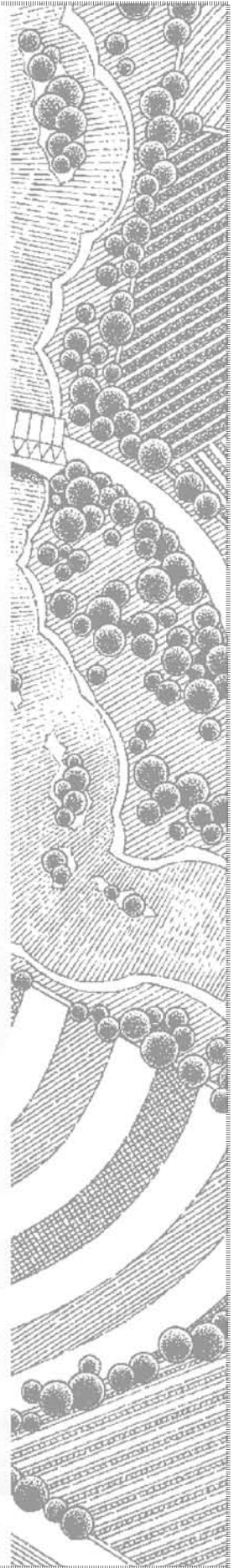
One important thing to remember about nonverbal communication is that every person has a unique way of using the body to communicate. So, a furrowed brow can mean anger or disapproval for one person but concentration and thoughtful consideration for another. Exercise discretion in reading other people's body signals. Over time, however, you will come to understand the body language of people with whom you frequently interact. It can be a very useful tool in deciphering meaning.

Speaking Your Mind

Although it is given less attention than other aspects of communication, interpersonal speech is probably more important than public speaking or even writing; after all, we spend much more time talking with people than writing to them or making presentations. And the way we speak to each other can cause misunderstandings and problems. Many people want to please others and so tend to be less direct and less clear than necessary. Others want their words and directions to be understood and, in their desire to be clear, can be abrasive. Here are some considerations and strategies for speaking clearly and effectively:



- **Volume.** Speaking too loudly can signal falseness or aggressiveness while speaking too softly can be seen as passive-aggressive because it forces others to hang on your every word while also being very difficult to challenge. Speaking too softly can also signal a lack of confidence.
- **Tone.** Even while your words are respectful, your tone can send another message—one of impatience, sarcasm, or anger. A neutral or positive tone is usually preferable. Even if you are angry and imparting negative information, a neutral, factual tone can defuse or improve the interaction.



- **Interruptions and clarifications.** You may be so engaged in a topic or conversation that you jump in to finish someone else's sentences and begin speaking. Try to minimize that tendency. When seeking further information, try phrases like "could you tell me what you mean by that?" rather than "I do not know what you mean" or "I do not know what you are talking about."
- **Wording.** If you are giving direction and you have the authority to do so, be clear. For example, "I need you to do this by 4:00 on Thursday" is more specific than "it would be great if this got done this week."

Conclusion

Strong communication skills are vital to effective management. If you cannot communicate with the people around you, you will be less able to do your job. This includes listening carefully to others, speaking clearly to an audience, writing effectively to get your message across on paper, and understanding nonverbal communication. Improving these skills takes practice and effort but can result in more open dialogue and trust between you and your vendors, your board members, and other people involved in the market.

