

## Summer 2003

### Watch Your International Body Language!

By Dr. Maureen Archer

Most of us are aware that different cultures use body language to communicate different messages. For example, the Japanese often nod pleasantly as Americans speak. Their nodding may not mean approval or even understanding; they may simply be showing respect to the speaker.

Although there are many differences between cultures, here are seven actions that we Americans do often and that other cultures interpret differently. As a general rule, try avoiding these actions when speaking with foreign nationals.

#### Standing with Hands in Pockets

If you stand with your hands in your pockets while speaking to an American, you may be perceived as being nervous. Throughout Europe, Japan, and China, however, standing with your hands in your pockets is considered extremely rude. It is better to rest your hands at your sides or on the podium until you need them to emphasize a point.

#### Smiling Constantly

Americans are known as "smilers": we smile often, even during serious occasions. Most internationals (especially the French and the Japanese) smile less frequently. They may consider smiling excessively as a sign of being less serious, as a sign of mockery, or as a sign of stupidity. During business meetings, therefore, we are well advised to don a less gleeful look until negotiations are successfully completed.

#### Showing the Sole of Your Foot or Shoe

If you sit with your legs crossed, letting the ankle of one leg rest on the knee of the other, you expose the sole of your foot (or shoe) to others. People in Thailand, Burma, the Middle East, and the Islamic States of the former Soviet Union consider such an action extremely offensive. The bottom of the foot is a dirty and lowly part of the body, so they believe it should not be shown in polite company.

#### Giving the "OK" Sign

Our seemingly harmless "OK" sign has a myriad of meanings globally. Throughout Europe and in Argentina, this sign means "zero" ("worthless"). In Japan this sign means money (coinage). It is a vulgar gesture in Spain, Russia, Paraguay, Brazil, and Uruguay. In Tunisia it means they are threatening to do you bodily harm. (**continued**)

### Giving Professional Presentations With Confidence

This interactive workshop will give participants the insights needed to create, practice, and deliver effective presentations. Topics will include

- Overcoming Speaker's Anxiety
- Knowing Your Audience
- Selecting and Organizing Information
- Using Visual Aids
- Practicing Volume and Pacing
- Using Body Language Effectively

Participants will receive a detailed handout, plus they will have a chance to practice some of these skills during the workshop.

**Tuesday, July 15, 2003**

**1:30 – 4:30**

**Peninsula Chamber of Commerce  
(near the Hampton Coliseum)  
1919 Commerce Dr., Suite 320  
Hampton, VA 23666**

Cost: \$90/person (includes refreshments).

**Ask about our group discounts.**

Advanced registration is required **by July 9**.  
Register by calling 873-0116 or by writing to  
[info@allenglishtraining.com](mailto:info@allenglishtraining.com).

## Watch Your International Body Language (cont.)

### Giving the "Thumbs Up" Sign

Although this sign means approval in the U.S., Great Britain, and Russia, it carries a very rude message in both Iran and Australia. In these cultures it is the equivalent of "flipping someone the bird" (the middle finger).

### Winking

Our friendly winks may be greatly misunderstood by our international counterparts. For example, in Paraguay a wink has a strongly sexual overtone, and in Australia and France winking is quite impolite.

### Blowing Your Nose in Public

The Chinese and Japanese consider blowing one's nose in public to be extremely rude. The French will view a public nose-blower as someone who was raised without proper manners.

Why is it important to know how our body language is interpreted? The outcomes can vary from mild to serious. For foreign nationals who understand American culture, these seven actions may just be distracting. However, for those who are unaware of our Americanisms, such actions might cause hard feelings, leave a poor impression of our upbringing, or transmit the wrong message. In any case, we have moved the focus away from our message, which may mean lost time and business.

Before meeting with foreign nationals, be sure to find out how their nonverbal communication differs from ours. There are many excellent books available on this subject (such as [A Short Course in International Business Culture](#) by Charles Mitchell, World Trade Press, 2000). By learning about their body language, you will not only understand your foreign contacts better but also have greater confidence knowing you are not offending them unintentionally.

"Tact is the art of making a point without making an enemy."

-- Howard W. Newton

"Information is giving out; communication is getting through."

-- Sydney J. Harris

## 26 Countries!

Professional English, Inc., is pleased to announce that it has provided English coaching to natives of the following twenty-six countries:

Armenia	Germany	India	Netherlands	Russia
Brazil	Ghana	Indonesia	Panama	Sri Lanka
Cambodia	Great Britain	Iran	Peru	Sweden
China	Greece	Japan	Poland	Thailand
Colombia	Hong Kong	Korea	Romania	United States
				Vietnam

It is a testament to Hampton Roads' diverse population that we have accomplished the above in under five years. These scientists, engineers, executives, business owners, military, medical personnel, and other professionals have enriched us as we have helped them improve their American English skills. We look forward to expanding this list as we (and our region) continue to grow.

## Dear Dr. A:

I see many words capitalized that I don't think should be. What are the rules for using capital letters?

**Leah S.**  
**Newport News, VA**



Dear Leah:

You are right; people often capitalize words they perceive as very important. However, the golden rule is to **capitalize proper nouns**. A proper noun is the specific name of a person, place, or thing. Here's a good reference list showing proper nouns and their common noun counterparts (which should not be capitalized):

### Proper Nouns

Jefferson Lab  
Aunt Sally  
Mom (used as a name)  
Dr. Jones  
ABC Company  
President Lee  
English

### Common Nouns

our research facility  
my aunt  
my mother or my mom  
the doctor  
our company  
our current president  
my native language

**Adjectives based on proper nouns should also be capitalized**, so the following are correct: the Biblical passage, this Chinese restaurant, my Buddhist neighbor, the American flag.

**Months, holidays, and days of the week should also be capitalized**, but seasons should not be capitalized unless attached to a specific year (e.g., Surprisingly, Winter 2003 was the wettest on record).

Example: This fall we will celebrate Thanksgiving on Thursday, November 27.

For more capitalization guidelines, consult a dictionary or good writing handbook, such as [The Business Writer's Handbook](#) (St. Martin's Press).

## Test Your Knowledge

Find the capitalization errors in the following passage (see below for the correction):

Our Company must hire a Marketing Specialist to increase sales in europe. The Manager of our spanish office has a Candidate who graduated with a Degree in Economics and has excellent International experience.

Send communication and culture questions to Dr. Maureen Archer ([archer@allenglishtraining.com](mailto:archer@allenglishtraining.com)).

Correct: Our company must hire a marketing specialist to increase sales in Europe. The manager of our Spanish office has a candidate who graduated with a degree in economics and has excellent international experience.