

The Little-Known Effect that Converts Prospects

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Nothing is more frustrating than finally getting the opportunity to discuss the merit of your services, but failing to persuade that prospect to retain you. This frustration is compounded when prospects stubbornly adhere to beliefs that you know are incorrect. Understanding the little-known “McGurk Effect” will allow you to overcome these failures.



I was reminded of this recently when a friend asked me to help select a law firm for an important case. I went with her to meetings at a number of potential firms. Prior to the appointments, I told her the firms would be interviewing her as much as she was interviewing them and advised her to “dress accordingly,” which she did. I took my own advice and wore a dark suit, white shirt and tie.

At one of the law firms, the partner appeared in dungarees and an open-collar shirt. He explained his firm was a “casual, fun place to work” and that his informal dress was consistent with that culture.

Although the firm was impressive, my friend never seriously considered them. She couldn’t overcome her visual impression of the attorney, which contrasted with the seriousness of her potential claim.

She had experienced the McGurk Effect.

Growing your firm’s assets under management is a daily challenge. Not only do you have to differentiate yourself from your competitors, but you must adapt to a rapidly changing landscape in which both your value proposition and the fees you charge are subject to intense scrutiny.

The McGurk Effect is powerful

The McGurk Effect describes how we integrate what we see into what we hear. Take a look at this [compelling video](#). Despite the fact that the audio in the two examples is the same, our brain hears them differently because the visual of the person speaking differs.

When there is a conflict between what we see and what we hear, we can struggle to make sense of the communication. These situations increase the chance of reaching erroneous conclusions. Conversely, when there is coherence between the audio that we hear and the visual that we see, we can rapidly make an accurate assessment.

The consequence of inconsistency

There’s ample evidence that verbal-nonverbal inconsistencies negatively impact our first impressions. Studies have shown that people who exhibit this inconsistency are viewed as confused, deceitful and dishonest. Those who exhibit this inconsistency are generally perceived more negatively than those who don’t and are often deemed “unlikeable.”

In one study, medical students were videotaped during clinical evaluations. Actresses played the role of “patients” interviewed by the medical students. The “patients” were instructed to communicate to the medical students that they were under considerable stress due to embarrassment at work caused by the symptoms of their medical condition (Crohn’s disease).

Undergraduate participants in the study were asked to rate these medical students after viewing video clips with audio, silent video clips or transcribed verbal content from the video clips. Both video clips were limited to showing the discussion regarding Crohn’s disease and its effects. One included audio and the other didn’t. The transcript was limited to the same period of time as the video clips.

The evaluations by different groups of participants demonstrated, generally, that those who exhibited more concern were deemed more likeable than those who exhibited less concern. This was especially so for the group that viewed the video with audio.

The medical students were rated as less likeable in cases where there was a perceived inconsistency between their verbal and non-verbal behavior.

Implications for advisors

Here's how you can use the McGurk Effect to your advantage when meeting with prospects:

1. Dress for the meeting. Don't make the same mistake that the senior partner in the law firm my friend and I interviewed made. You want to be perceived as likeable, competent, trustworthy and professional. Look the part.
2. Be aware of your nonverbal cues. Open gestures, with arms spread wide from your side and palms out, convey transparency and honesty. Smiling conveys warmth and trustworthiness. Lean forward when your prospect is speaking. Nod affirmatively when you agree with something that is being said. These gestures convey interest and understanding.
3. Above all, focus on listening and not on speaking. Prospects want to be heard and understood. Few want to be "educated." You pay your prospects the ultimate compliment when you take the time to fully understand their agenda instead of presenting yours.

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