COMMUNICATION | PSYCHOLOGY

Preening Displays in Business and Personal Life

We can use this nuance of Non-Verbal Communication to our advantage in sales, in negotiations, and in our personal lives.

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Preening is the act of grooming oneself. It is highly contextual and it's culture dependent. Birds and mammals preen themselves often. By fine-tuning our knowledge of the preening process, and being more aware of the specific signals or lack of signals sent or absent,

we can use this nuance of Non-Verbal Communication to our advantage in sales, in negotiations, and in our personal lives.

Here are four key preening-related issues you'll want to always keep in mind:

Physical Attraction: We all know this intuitively, yet depending on the social setting, our self-awareness, and even our culture, the specific act(s) of preening vary widely. Psychologists and sociologists have long noted that preening is part of the courtship process. Preening oneself occurs on both a conscious and subconscious level and most often it is subconsciously received by those for who it is intended. The following are some examples of preening in the context of physical attraction:

Women will often toss their hair with a characteristic head flick and men with long hair will do this as well. Both Men and women will often run their hands through their hair too. Men and women will straighten and smooth out their clothes in an attempt to improve their appearance. Women will check the status

of their make-up and freshen their lipstick. A man will often straighten his tie and pull up his socks. Women will pull down the back of their blouse and adjust the height of their pants, skirt or dress whenever they stand up in a public setting or just before entering a store or restaurant. Men will often adjust their shirt cuffs and their watches. Sitting up straighter is an action commonly displayed by both sexes. A women may adjust her jewelry, tilt her head (thus exposing her neck), and cross her legs. A man will tend to stand taller, puff out his chest, and suck in his stomach.

> ***When observed in the right context, these can be all be signs of the preening associated with physical attraction.***

Preening someone you care about, either your child or your lover is very common. A loving parent will correct the appearance of their child before they consider their own. A lover will straighten out your collar or remove lint from the shoulder of your jacket, however a casual acquaintance would be well advised not to do so.

As a sign of Respect: If you're a physician for example, when you enter an exam room, after you shake the patients hand, and introduce yourself, it is a fantastic rapport building tool to briefly straighten your tie, smooth out your jacket, etc. You shouldn't prolong such an action, in fact it should be brief – and of course, it should not be overly dramatic. The same type of preening will work with your clients you're an attorney, if you're a sales person or meeting with your boss.

> ***It shows respect and demonstrates that you value their relationship. The vast majority of the time this signal is sent at the level of the subconscious.***

As a sign of disrespect: It's ironic when you first consider it, but preening may also be a sign of disrespect. As noted above, preening in the presence of someone you respect, and/or someone you want to respect you, should not be too dramatic, and not last longer than a few seconds at the very beginning of a conversation/meeting. If prolonged, it will be viewed as deliberately inattentive, and a sign of disrespect.

If someone preens for a prolonged time when you are having a meeting/discussion with them – and they are your peer or subordinate – then you should wait until they are through with this display and they give you their attention before you continue. This will send the message that such behavior is not acceptable and give you the upper hand in a tactful manner. If you talk through the preening you are condoning their attitude of disrespect.

If the other person is your boss, or a person with high authority whose respect or favor you are seeking – strongly consider other employment or other alternatives to accomplish your goal.

A Sign of Poor Mental or Physical Health: You may have visited someone in the hospital and been struck by how unkempt they appear. If you have been hospitalized yourself, this is no surprise at all. When sick, our appearances drop off our priority list.

This is also true as a sign of poor or deteriorating mental health. We see this exemplified on our streets all too often. Being aware of this particular warning sign will allow us to be more cognizant of friends, family or co-workers who may need help, but who may never ask.

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