

Title:
Words Matter

Word Count:
618

Summary:

While tone of voice and body language matter very much, don't underestimate the power of words. This article debunks a famous allegation about UCLA Psychology research in 1967. The research team leader is quoted saying that his work had been grossly misunderstood. The allegation: that words only count for 7% of the meaning in communication.

Keywords:

writing, editorial, newsletter, business, communication

Article Body:

Words Matter

Despite the high volume of e-mail that flows invisibly all the time, there is often no substitute for talking with people. Indeed, in many organizations, big decisions are made only after in-person conversations. Many career people take this seriously. Herein lies an opening for misjudgement.

present with sincere gusto

It is not uncommon to find a white-collar worker who believes that tone of voice and body language are underrated in effective speaking. Some polish their hand gestures and rehearse specific tones of voice because they believe that substance without style is weak. It's not just content, they say, but delivery. Seeking an edge, some even have the famous 7% rule memorized.

The 7% rule states:

- 55% of meaning comes from presentation

- 38% of meaning comes from tonality

- 7% of meaning comes from the words themselves.

Though this has brought confidence and success to some, there are still people who pay more than 7% attention to the words others speak. Neither is a fringe group. However, only the latter has the backing of scientific research.

still misunderstood

In 1967, Dr. Albert Mehrabian and his UCLA colleagues concluded studies in communication that yielded an astonishing result: The words you use in speaking to others do not matter nearly as much as the tone of your voice or your body language. As the press picked up the story, the idea was extended: written words also take a back seat to presentation and tonality.

good for shock value

According to Mehrabian and his team, the original studies were never well understood. They have always asserted that words matter very much. Perhaps they didn't use the right presentation and tone - or perhaps the media were hunting for shock value.

single-word expressions only

The Mehrabian studies attempted to reveal the relative impact of facial expressions and tonality on the understanding of spoken words. Subjects listened to recordings of a female voice saying single words (such as "maybe" and "honey") in different tonalities. They were also shown photos of female faces with different facial expressions. They were then asked to guess the emotions portrayed in each, and to link the recordings with the faces.

presentation and tone as guides

The results of the studies appeared in full in Mehrabian's books, *Silent Messages* (Wadsworth, 1971) and *Nonverbal Communications* (Aldine Atherton, 1972). In both books, he clearly states that for inconsistent messages or incongruent communications, body language and tonality are probably more reliable indicators of meaning than the words themselves. Presentation and tone are more reliable than words alone for interpretive guidance with single-word expressions. These are not general circumstances.

The 7% Rule is a Lie!

In a 1994 issue of *Anchor Point*, Dr. C.E. Johnson writes, "If these percentages were really valid, it would mean that learning foreign languages could be greatly abbreviated. After all, if the words only account for 7% of the meaning, we should all be able to go to any country in the world and simply by listening to tone and carefully observing body language, be able to accurately interpret 93% of their communications!"

Tone mightier than a sword?

In a 1997 issue of *The Toastmaster*, J.E. Pearson asks, "Imagine if Nathan Hale had said, 'Okay; I'm willing to die for my country,' instead of 'I regret that I have but one life to give for my country.' Imagine Winston Churchill saying, 'Don't be afraid,' instead of, 'We have nothing to fear but fear itself.'"

Yes; tone of voice and body language matter very much - especially with single-

word expressions. When speaking within a common language and culture do not be fooled by the myth of the 7% rule. Words matter - probably much more than 7%.