

How to Make a Positive and Powerful First Impression

As you've doubtless been told time and time again, it takes only ten or fifteen seconds to make first impressions—and the rest of your life to undo it, if it's a negative one. Here are some guidelines to get you off on the right foot.

Four rules for making a good impression

Since body language and words both play a major role in how you are perceived by others, let's look at four rules that address the first impressions we present to others.

1. Make your first 10 words count. The most effective way to open any interaction is to send a “thanks” message.

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me this morning, Mr. Smith.”

“It's a pleasure to finally meet you in person, Miss Wright.”

- There are excellent thanks messages for first-time meetings. You can also this rule effectively with people you already know. For example,

“Thanks for your interest in getting together, Barbara.”

“Dennis, thank you for suggesting we meet.”

- When possible, include the person's name in the first ten or twelve words of conversation.

“It's great seeing you again, Charlie.”

- Admit it. Most of us tune in when we hear our names. We all enjoy personal recognition, no matter how modest. So start on a positive note and recognize the person you're speaking to.

2. Tune into others. Make eye contact. Wear a smile. Your expression can convey energy and motivation or gloom and depression.

- Your expressions demonstrate the confidence you have in yourself. Smile. Be vibrant. Be confident. And people will respond positively. Try it. It works.

3. Walk with a purpose. Whether you're walking into your office building or are on your way to meet clients, put some bounce into your step. Move with vigor and vitality.

4. Be impeccably groomed.

- Keep your hair neat and in a fashion that flatters the shape of your face.
- Wear jewelry appropriate to the event and situation.
- Men, use the one-finger test when buying shirts.
- Give the same attention to the grooming of your shoes that you do to your hair and clothing. Don't forget to pay attention to your socks or hose.

Seven easy ways to sabotage a first impression

Try as we might to make that all-important first impression a positive one, it's easy to fall into one of the following very common manner traps.

1. Sloppy language

- Are you using terms that are not correct? “Anyways” is not a word.
- Use a vocabulary appropriate to the situation.

2. Using lazy words.

- Examples are yeah rather than yes, you guys rather than you, and okey dokey rather than all right.

3. Giggling.

- Some people giggle to fill silent or awkward moments. They should simply pause instead.
- Giggling is a distracting and unprofessional habit.

4. Inappropriate touching.

- The only legitimate form of touch in business is the handshake. Unless you've established a rapport with someone, a pat, nudge, or touch on the arm can be perceived as too friendly.

5. Hiding your hands.

- When your hands are not showing, it often sends a signal to someone that you are not telling all or that you're holding something back.
- Also be aware of using your hands too much while talking.

6. Gum chewing.

- During the work day you may very well be perceived as unprofessional.

7. Throat clearing.

- The habit of clearing your throat several times during a conversation can be very distracting. Having the occasional urge to clear your throat is one thing. But if it becomes an annoying habit, try swallowing instead.

Commonly Asked Questions About First Impressions

Q. In my opinion, the phrase, "What can I do for you?" is very condescending. How does it rate with you?

A. You have my vote. Phrases such as "How can I help you?" or "How may I be of assistance to you?" have a much better ring.

Q. Do you have any tips for projecting confidence? I've just changed jobs and would like to start out on the right foot.

A. Always be a few minutes early for appointments. Be organized. Surround yourself with a team of confident staff members.