

5 Tips to Create a Positive First Impression

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Special to Online Career Tips

"I think I blew it with the new vice president," moaned my coaching client. "I was drowning in paperwork when she walked through our department introducing herself. I was so distracted I could hardly get my own name out of my mouth. On top of that, I was wearing jeans while the VP and just about everyone else in my department was wearing a suit that day. I can only imagine the awful first impression I made."



Did you know it takes only three to five seconds for someone to form a first impression? And while you might wish that opinion were based on your intelligence or experience, most studies show that first impressions are shaped by what can be seen or heard in those initial few seconds. What impression are you creating?

Harvard Business School social psychologist, Amy Cuddy, has studied first impressions and found that when meeting someone for the first time, we form not one impression, but two. "We're judging how warm and trustworthy the person is, and that's trying to answer the question, 'What are this person's intentions toward me?' And we're also asking ourselves, 'How strong and competent is this person?'" states Cuddy. Her research shows that these two traits, trustworthiness and confidence, account for 80 to 90 percent of first impressions.

Why are first impressions so important? "First impressions matter when you want to build a lasting trust," says Robert Lount, an assistant professor at Ohio State University. "If you get off on the wrong foot, the relationship may never be completely right again. It's easier to build trust after a breach if you already have a strong relationship."

One way to ensure a positive first impression is by focusing on managing your image. According to the **Image Consulting Business Institute**, image management is the "ongoing, pro-active process of evaluating and controlling the impact of your appearance on you, on others, and the achievement of your goals. It is a science and an art that provides a framework, addressing all the elements – clothing, grooming practices, body language and etiquette and vocal communication."

Image management is important for creating positive first impressions as well as for achieving career aspirations because it helps you:

- ◆ Control what others see/perceive
- ◆ Enhance others' perception of you
- ◆ Project trustworthiness
- ◆ Inspire confidence in your abilities
- ◆ Exude friendliness, approachability and likeability
- ◆ Open doors to opportunities
- ◆ Enhance/elevate your status

What does your current image say about you? Does your image project the impression that you are competent, confident, trustworthy and approachable? Or, does your image tell people you're stressed, indecisive, overwhelmed and/or unreliable?

Take a few minutes to think about how you come across to others and jot down a few notes. After you've brainstormed some thoughts, read through the following five tips and determine ways you can change/improve your image to project a more positive first impression:

Tip #1: Analyze your attire. Do your clothes project an appropriate personal image? For example, if you're trying to cultivate an executive presence in a fairly formal industry and company, do you dress the part by wearing suits? If you want people to view you as creative, do your clothing (and jewelry) choices reflect your individual creativity? Personal shoppers and stylists are great resources to help you upgrade your wardrobe and overall 'look.'



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Tip #2: Role-play your verbal communication. Do you speak clearly, professionally and at an appropriate pace and sound level when first meeting someone? Ask a friend to role-play and look for ways you can modify your verbal communication to create an improved first impression.

Tip #3: Evaluate your non-verbal communication. Do you shake hands like a limp fish? Practice non-verbal communication, such as shaking hands firmly and establishing good eye contact to ensure you aren't doing anything that could damage a good first impression.

Tip #4: Examine your attitude. Do you smile when first meeting someone, even if you're busy and have other things on your mind? Are you focusing on that person and giving them your full attention? If not, you might be harming your image.

Tip #5: Scrutinize your grooming (hair, make-up, cleanliness, etc.). Does your hair (and make-up, if female) project the image you want to project? Maybe it's time to consult a stylist for an updated style or sit down with a make-up artist to create a different look.

As my career coaching client found out the hard way, taking the time to manage your image will improve the odds of making a positive first impression in those initial three to five seconds – and will help you exude confidence and trustworthiness in almost any situation.

