

Fabulous First Impressions

Think back to a blind date, interview or party when you first met someone new. Chances are that within four seconds you made a snap judgment on how much you liked and trusted the person.

We do it to other people, and other people do it to us. It's called the "four-second window," and our challenge as communicators is to learn how to master first impressions in order to open the lines of communication.

For a few, the "four-second window" is a breeze.

These rare men and women have naturally high "likeability factors," a face, smile or presence in which people instantly warm. Most of us, however, have to win audiences over fast.

When I ask executives to list ways they think we make powerful first impressions, they almost always answer first with "dress." Clothes may not make the man or woman, but they do convey a message. To project a professional image, consider these suggestions:

? Don't buy clothes, invest in them. Invest in at least one power suit that makes you feel great.

? Find a clothing store and/or salesperson you can trust. Also, find a good tailor or seamstress. Proper tailoring is as important as the quality of the clothes you wear.

? Pay particular attention to the condition of your shoes. Check the condition of heels, soles, polish, leather and shoelaces before going out.

? Dress for the place. Choose your wardrobe to match the region, company and person with whom you are meeting. In recent years, casual dress became a standard for most businesses, but this is changing. More and more offices are adopting more formal modes of dress.

Experts abound on the subject of proper business dress and grooming, yet the best advice for dressing for presenting came from one of my seminar participants. She suggested looking into the mirror to see if anything stands out and if it does take it off or change it. She was right: we want the focus on our face, not our clothes.

In addition to dress, four other factors contribute to an audience's first impressions: gestures, movement, stance and eye contact. Of these, stance and eye contact are particularly important.

Like appearance, stance contributes to instant credibility, and for many women, stance is a challenge. Most women are taught at a young age to assume a dancer's pose, feet close together with one toe pointed out at a 90-degree angle. While this stance may be pretty and feminine, it holds no authority.

Instead, I counsel both men and women to stand tall, feet shoulder width and pointed straight ahead. While it is important to gesture naturally, hands should rest at our sides when not in use.

Stance is important in establishing credibility so don't hide it. At no time should speakers stand behind a podium, desk, table or other obstacle.

Great speakers allow their audiences to see all of them - physically as well as emotionally.

The eyes have been called the "windows of the soul." As such, they are one of our greatest asset in winning audiences. When it comes to eye contact, great speakers use a rifle instead of a shotgun.

I coach executives to begin their presentations by standing in silence, finding a friendly face, establishing eye contact, taking a deep breath and then beginning their talk. This simple tip helps speakers become grounded and start their presentations with authority.

Many presenters talk while moving their heads from person to person like a sprinkler system, or worse they lose all connection with their audience by staring at one person, the slide screen or the back of the room. I train presenters to pick one person and maintain steady eye contact with that person until they have delivered a complete thought then move on to someone else. Intensive eye contact can be uncomfortable, yet it is also highly effective in generating trust.

Appearance, stance and eye contact have to do with how we look, and looks are important in creating positive first impressions. But I believe even more important is how we make others feel. We can help others feel comfortable by:

? Being the first to look at them in the eye, really looking at them when we do, noting the color of their eyes.

? Being the first to smile.

? Identifying ourselves first and leaning forward.

? Extending our hand, or offering a "handless handshake," where we do everything we would do in extending our hand, but don't.

Repeating their names.

In conclusion, credibility and likeability are keys to fabulous first impressions. We can communicate credibility by dressing sharp and paying attention to such details as stance and eye contact, and we can become more likeable by working consciously to make people feel comfortable around us.

Source: <http://www.articlecircle.com>

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