

How to Create an Unforgettable First Impression

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I recently attended a conference where a lot of different speakers were presenting. It's the kind of conference you come away from with a million ideas for improving your business, fabulous networking contacts and loads of inspiration.

Each speaker was more confident and polished than the next and delivered on their promise and then some. And then a presenter took the stage that made me catch my breath, and not in a good way.

Shirt coming untucked, suit ill-fitting, shoulders slumped, not much eye contact with the audience...

...I was so distracted by his lack of confidence and his Schlumpy appearance that I found myself alternating between feeling badly for him, having a complete lack of interest in what he was saying and being ultra critical (and a bit dubious) of what I actually heard.

It was such a shame because I'm sure he had good material to deliver, but the first impression he was giving out didn't give me confidence that he knew what he was talking about!

I started observing the audience during this guy's presentation. People were losing interest fast! Blackberries were whipped out, the bathroom suddenly became the popular place to be and the noise level audibly became louder.

This speaker gave up his authority before he even began to speak, and unfortunately his expert status went right out the window.

It doesn't matter if you are a presenter to a large group or to one individual. Creating a first impression that is *unforgettable* is critically important! It could mean the difference in whether you get that contract, business opportunity or are able to develop both the business and personal relationships that you want and need.

Think about it...

When you meet someone for the first time, especially someone that is supposed to be an expert in their field, don't you find yourself with certain expectations? You pay more attention to what they say, their actions, what they're wearing and how they're groomed because you want to confirm their expert status. You find yourself disappointed when that person doesn't meet those expectations, don't you!

So...if you're the expert in your field, it's safe to assume the same thing is happening to you!

Whether you like it or not, your abilities, and even your authority are being judged on your appearance. It sounds harsh, but it's true.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, what picture are you painting with your self-portrait?

Here are some tips for creating the first impression that YOU want others to have of you!

Wear Clothes that Fit and Flatter. Clothing that is too big is just as bad as clothing that is too small. Too big, and you look sloppy or like you are trying to hide something. Too small, and you'll wind up looking like a stuffed sausage. You instinctively KNOW when something doesn't fit right...it binds, it sags, and it bunches up. Pay attention to those signals and only wear items that fit. But, don't give up on those items that you love that don't fit just yet. Find yourself a good tailor and make them your best friend or take advantage of in-store tailoring. You'll be amazed at what they can do to alter a garment, including shortening sleeves on jackets, taking in the waistband on pants that gap at the waist, and removing too much fullness from tops.

Give Careful Consideration to Your Outfit. I cannot stress enough how important it is, especially if you will be finding yourself in front of potential clients, customers or people who will be buying something from you that you give some thought to what you put on in the morning. It's not enough to reach for whatever is easiest or clean! You must create an outfit that speaks authoritatively yet fits flatters and is stylish.

Additionally, what you wear must be appropriate for the occasion. In a business situation, especially for those when you don't know the people you are meeting, you must dress to the occasion. If it's a conservative setting, that probably means a suit and dressing with authority (see below). For more creative settings, you may not want to wear that pinstripe suit but instead something that is business savvy yet chic.

Dress with Authority. If you're a woman, this means wearing either a collared shirt or jacket over slacks or a skirt. Those cardigans and jeans sure are stylish, but they don't do anything to help you establish your authority. And whatever you do, only wear something sleeveless if you don't intend to remove your jacket! For men, similar rules apply, although no skirts for you! Polo shirts and khaki's are okay for more casual situations, but I'd leave them in the closet if you really want to make an impression.

Dress Your Age. Before you get all wonky on me about this one, I'm not suggesting that you have to dress like your Nana if you're over 30. What I am saying is that you must be aware of how you're perceived when you dress outside your age range. If you're under 30 you can get away with most of the silly trends...over 30 and you need to stop trying so hard to recapture your youth and dressing like your teenager or it looks ridiculous. Likewise, if you're under 30, you really should shy away from things that will make you look years beyond your age. Being over 30 isn't an excuse to wear elastic waist clothing and matched outfits...you should be going for sophisticated and chic, not trendy.

Show Your Personality. This article is not about conformity, but rather appropriateness for the situation. The key is to find a way to inject your own personality within that context. Don't forget that you are unique and you want to portray that to others! This can be accomplished by wearing a standout piece of jewelry, or a fabulous tie. If you are in an ultra conservative profession or business, you may need to keep it toned down a bit, but in the right situation that funky pocket square or statement necklace might also be a good icebreaker or conversation starter, and it will certainly help to get you noticed!

Don't Be a Fashion Victim. Sometimes too much of a good thing is too much. When you overdo it on the trends or go hard after a particular "look", it can take on the impression that you are 1. Trying too hard and 2. Wearing a costume. Witness the woman trying hard to show she's on top of the animal print trend by wearing an outfit full of it from head to toe instead of picking one piece and letting it stand out. You may laugh at the example, but do you do the same thing with color? Purple may be on trend, but head to toe purple is never stylish...you just look like Barney.

Pay Attention to the Details. Over-accessorizing, too much after shave, wearing accessories that don't complement your outfit, wearing scuffed or outdated shoes...the list goes on! Paying attention to the details can make or break your outfit. Don't polish your shoes and see where everyone's eye goes to! It's the little things that will drag the attention away from where it should be...on you and what you're saying!

Iron Your Clothes. Unless the pleating is meant to be there, looking like you just rolled out of bed is very collegiate and says nothing about your style except that you're sloppy and don't really care about how you look. If you're too busy in the morning when getting dressed, spend an hour ironing one night each week after doing the laundry...much more efficient than one at a time!

Stay Current with Your Hairstyle. If you have not changed your hairstyle in several years, you either need to find some bravery within yourself for change, or get yourself to a new stylist who doesn't have an emotional attachment to hairstyle he created for you many moons ago. Like with shoes, your look is instantly dated if your hairstyle hasn't kept up with the times.

Look in the Mirror. You can always tell the individual who was in a hurry to get out of the house...their hair looks great from the front but is a mess in the back or their collar has gotten caught inside out. Take that extra 15 seconds either when you leave the house or again before a presentation to make sure you look at yourself with a critical eye, and quickly fix any boo-boos.

Be Mindful of Your Body Language. So much of your appearance will be a result of your confidence, which is mostly perceived through your body language. Do what your Mama told you; stand up straight, look them in the eye, give a firm handshake when appropriate, and whatever you do, don't forget to smile! You will project confidence, authority and self-assurance...all highly prized assets when trying to make a good first impression. Not to mention it will instantly put your audience at ease!

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Online entrepreneur Barbara Ellis is the executive behind the style at The Stylish Executive. For excellent advice and tips on how to achieve your own fabulous style and build your personal brand, please visit www.stylishexecutive.com to sign up now for your FREE tips.