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Make a First-Rate First Impression

They say you can't judge a book by its cover, but when it comes to people, first impressions are everything. The way you present yourself to others can decide how they perceive you and relate to you. From your clothes to your handshake, you share aspects of yourself in those opening moments that can leave a lasting mark.

Make sure it's a positive one.

"You don't get a second chance to make a first impression. Once made, it's hard to change," says Diane Paul, Ph.D., director of clinical issues in speech-language pathology at the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association.

It takes someone just seconds to size you up. "The factors that affect their first impression of you are your credibility, likability, attractiveness and dominance," says Patti Wood, a consultant with Communication Dynamics in Atlanta. Within 10 minutes, people often decide what type of relationship they want with you, suggests a recent study from Ohio State University and the University of Minnesota in Duluth.

"We're genetically predisposed to make quick and accurate assessments," Ms. Wood adds. It began with cave-dwelling ancestors who relied on first impressions for survival, to judge risks and rewards from strangers. Today, those first few moments may decide whether someone will hire you or go out on a date with you.

"People like, and tend to bond with, those who are like them," says Karla Brandau, president of People Skills International in Atlanta. To make your first impression count:

- Know the territory. Find out, for example, if that business banquet next week calls for casual or formal attire.
- Spell out your intentions. Decide what you want from the situation, so you can make your image and actions match your goals.
- Be aware of yourself. Make sure what you're trying to communicate is being received the right way.
- Be sensitive to differences. Everything from eye contact to word choice can vary depending on someone's ethnic background, gender or age.
- Search for common ground. Try to come across in a way that emphasizes similarities.
- Watch what you're thinking. Your thoughts shape your actions, which in turn affect how others see you.
- Be yourself. Know who you are and be true to that, so you can express real honesty and sincerity.

"You have to start from within," Ms. Brandau says. "You have to care and feel good about yourself, so you can feel the same for others. Hopefully, the way you are with them is who you truly are."

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Nine keys to a good first impression

Before you open your mouth, you're already saying something -- with your clothes, posture, body language and behavior. "Nonverbal expression accounts for 80 percent of our communication, regardless of whether or not we intend to convey a specific message," says Dr. Paul.

The first thing people notice is your demeanor, followed by the physical cues you give and the words you speak. To make a good first impression, watch your:

1. Attire. Dress based on the circumstances and your goals, whether it's to stand out, blend in, make a statement or gain acceptance.
2. Personal space. Put yourself at a comfortable and appropriate distance. "Too far may convey disinterest, too close may feel intrusive," Dr. Paul says.
3. Posture. Hold yourself erect but relaxed. "Turn your face, heart and feet toward the person to display interest," says Ms. Wood.
4. Eye contact. Make it direct, but no more than five seconds at a time. Any longer could be perceived as a power trip or a come-on.
5. Handshake. With eye contact and a smile, offer a firm and warm clasp with palms touching, "to express a desire to connect," Dr. Paul says.
6. Physical gestures. "Maintain poise and exhibit purposeful and calming mannerisms," she adds. Avoid nervous habits like fidgeting and nail-biting.
7. Etiquette. Be polite, know how to introduce people to each other, and express your appreciation for meeting them.
8. Conversation. Say things about yourself that might interest others. Actively listen to the other person, with affirming remarks, nods and questions.
9. Verbal expression. Modify the volume, pitch, tempo and tone of your voice to match that of the other person.

To make a favorable first impression by phone, look in the mirror and smile before dialing. The emotion in your voice is all people have to go by.

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