

How to Make a Powerful First Impression

Learn the art of presence and small talk from communications experts who swear you can do it even if you don't think you can.

By Robert Jones November 17, 2008

If it's true that time is money, then it's small wonder [business](#) owners find they can never truly clock out. Wherever they go and whomever they meet, entrepreneurs are walking billboards for their companies.

In a tough economy, where advertising budgets are cut to the bone, that kind of person-to-person [marketing](#) is more important than ever. But if you're a billboard, how can you be sure you're communicating the right message? How do you get people to notice you without offending, boring or confusing them?

Body language

Lillian Bjorseth, a communications consultant and author of *Breakthrough Networking*, says people decide many things about you within 10 seconds of seeing you--usually before you even open your mouth. That's why [entrepreneurs](#) should always be conscious of their aura, she says.

"The aura is the area around you that you create by what you wear, how you act, how you look," she says. "It all goes together to make one impression. You could wear a very expensive suit, but if you stand slumped over with your head down, you won't give a confident aura."

Though every person's aura is complex and unique, Bjorseth says entrepreneurs can focus on a few simple, non-verbal priorities to appear confident and in control. First, don't slip into a room "all smiles." Instead, "claim your space" in the room by planting your feet six inches to eight inches apart, one slightly ahead of the other--a stance that will make you feel grounded and confident.

After you've established eye contact, Bjorseth says a smile will create an upbeat, positive environment. Maintain eye contact 85 percent of the time during a conversation, she recommends. Doing so will make you seem trustworthy *and* it will demonstrate that you're interested in what the other person has to say.

To avoid a fumbling introduction, Bjorseth says every entrepreneur should have in mind a "verbal business card"--a quick, 30-word summary of who you are and what you can do. Focus on benefits for the other person rather than job titles or even company names, she recommends. "You want to make sure people remember you as opposed to others who do the same thing you do."

Conversation

When it's time to move beyond the handshake stage, simple conversational skills are the key to a successful first meeting, says Rosalie Maggio, bestselling author of *How to Say It* and *The Art of Talking to Anyone*.

"Prepare in advance, then just try to forget yourself," she says. "Being too self-conscious is the quickest way to shoot yourself in the foot. Remember that it's about the other person--that's the best possible way to make a positive first impression."

To help shift focus to the other person, Maggio says a bit of small talk is appropriate in almost every setting. When meeting someone new, the conversation should resemble a tennis match, with each participant taking a quick swing before sending it back to the other person. Too many Americans confuse their sports metaphors, **treating** a conversation "more like golf, where you just keep hitting your own ball over and over again . . . If you've talked for more than a minute, it's too long."

From formal pitches to impromptu meetings at a trade show, no two conversations will ever be the same. But Maggio says one element is critical no matter what the setting: the ability to show appreciation.

"In every conversation, include at least one appreciative remark," she says. Praise the other person's business acumen, charity work, or even her taste in shoes. As long as the appreciation is brief, sincere, and specific, the feeling will be remembered long after the words are forgotten."

Voice

Beyond body language and conversational skills, the actual tone of your voice is an important part of the impression you create, says Sandra McKnight, owner of Voice Power Studios in Santa Fe, N.M.

"In face-to-face conversation, the other person first sees you, then hears the tone of your voice, and only then listens to your words. It can create a negative impression very easily if you're not in control of the way you speak."

Entrepreneurs who speak in monotone will be perceived as uninspiring, while those who speak too quietly will come across as uncertain. But the most common problem, McKnight says, is speed-talking, which dilutes the message and makes the speaker sound anxious.

"Bright people have a tendency to talk fast because their minds move fast," she says. "But it's not about data dumping. It's about communicating so that you're understood."

To ensure that you're speaking at the right pace, McKnight suggests reading aloud from a book for 60 seconds. When time is up, go back and count the words in the selection you just read. The ideal speaking pace, she says, is about 145 words per minute--but don't forget that you probably speak even faster than you read.

The keys to creating a positive first impression aren't secrets that are hidden away and accessible only through visits to an oracle or a high-priced seminar. Body language, conversation and voice are three of the most important aspects of a first impression. The bad news is too many people think they lack skill in these areas. The good news is that most anyone can practice each of them and master their first impression.