

How to Make a Strong First Impression

Seven Tips That Really Work!

by Bill Lampton, Ph.D.

We have all heard this warning: “You never get a second chance to make a good first impression.” Also, psychologists, writers, and seminar leaders caution that we only have from seven to seventeen seconds of interacting with strangers before they form an opinion of us.

With this widely acknowledged pressure to “make our case” instantly, here are my seven tips for making your first impression strongly positive.

1. Show that you're other-centered

The greatest way to make a positive first impression is to demonstrate immediately that the other person--not you--is the center of action and conversation.

Illustrate that the spotlight is on you only, and you'll miss opportunities for friendships, jobs, love relationships, networking, and sales. Show that you are other-centered, and first-time acquaintances will be eager to see you again.

Recently I attended a conference. At lunch, my wife and I sat with several people we didn't know. While most of our tablemates made good impressions, one man emerged as the person we'd be sure to avoid all weekend. He talked about himself, non-stop. Only rarely did anyone else get a chance to speak. Unfortunately, he probably thought he was captivating us with his life story.

I applaud this definition of a bore: “Somebody who talks about himself so much that you don't get to talk about yourself.”

2. Show good listening skills

Closely related: You'll make a superb initial impression when you demonstrate good listening skills. Give positive verbal cues: “*Hmmm. . .interesting!*” “*Tell me more, please.*” “*What did you do next?*” Just as

actors benefit from prompts, your conversational partner will welcome your assistance in keeping the exchange going.

Nonverbally, you show you're a skilled listener by maintaining steady eye contact. Remember how you respond to the social gadabout who appears to be looking over your shoulder for the next person he wants to corner.

3. Mention the other person's name frequently

Use the name of a new acquaintance frequently. "*Judy, I like that suggestion.*" "*Your vacation must have been exciting, Fred.*" You show that you have paid attention from the start, catching the name during the introduction. Equally as important, you'll make conversations more personal by including the listener's name several times.

4. Use humor with care!

Be careful with humor. Although a quip or two might serve as an icebreaker, stay away from sarcastic remarks that could backfire. Because you don't know a stranger's sensitivities, prolonged joking might establish barriers you can't overcome, either now or later.

5. Don't insist that you're right!

Follow Dr. Wayne Dyer's advice, offered in his wonderful book *Real Magic*, by "giving up the need to be right." Confrontations with somebody you've just met will destroy rapport before you even start building it. Wait until you have established credibility before you challenge another's statements.

6. Make sure to look the part

Appearance counts. Several years ago, a professional colleague offered to meet me for lunch. I decided against wearing a suit, opting for a sport coat and tie.

When he showed up in shorts and sandals, the message he conveyed was: "Bill, meeting you is a rather ordinary experience, and doesn't call for me to present a business-like appearance."

Not surprisingly, that was the last time I met with him.

True, standards for appropriate attire have changed drastically. Maybe the best advice I can share came from a participant in a seminar I conducted. She said, "I don't dress for the job I have now, I dress for the job I want to have."

7. Watch your words and how you say them

As a communication specialist, I have to point out that an individual's speaking style impacts the first impression, maybe more than we wish. Listeners judge our intelligence, our cultural level, our education, even our leadership ability by the words we select--and by how we say them. Think of Professor Henry Higgins of "My Fair Lady," who changed a "guttersnipe" into a lady by teaching her to speak skillfully. While none of us occupies the lowly level of Eliza Doolittle, we can keep her example in mind.

Rather than mumble, speak so you're easily heard. Enunciate clearly. Alter your pitch, to avoid the dullness of a monotone. Display animation in both voice and facial expression. Gesture naturally, without "canning" your movements.

Keep these seven tips in mind. They will reduce your fear of business and social encounters with unfamiliar faces. More positively, you'll start enjoying poise and success that you thought were beyond your reach.

Bill Lampton, Ph.D., helps organizations strengthen their communication, motivation, customer service, and sales, through his speeches, seminars, and executive coaching. His prestigious client list includes the Ritz-Carlton Cancun, Celebrity Cruises, Duracell, Missouri Bar, and Gillette. Visit his Web site to contact him and to subscribe to his complimentary monthly E-mail newsletter: <http://www.ChampionshipCommunication.com>.