

# How to Make a Great First Impression

by Carol Dunitz, Ph.D.

How long does it take for someone you meet to form an opinion about you? Only 6 to 12 seconds. Increasing the probability it is positive is important because first impressions are lasting impressions that are difficult to change. Take control by giving people the initial information they need to conclude you are an professional, attractive, intelligent person they would like to know. The right dress and nonverbal cues will lead them to attribute other positive characteristics to you before a word is ever spoken.

People assume all sorts of information about you based on your appearance...whether or not you are educated, whether or not you are well-informed, whether or not you have 'personality,' whether or not you are someone they would like to get to know. The possibilities are endless, and you don't want their mental associations and imagination rob you of the opportunity to develop a meaningful relationship.

Start with good grooming and hygiene. Make sure your hair and nails look good. If you are a woman, use makeup appropriately. In a business setting, less is more. The same goes for fragrance and jewelry.

How do you dress? Obviously that changes based on where you are and what you are doing. It's always a good idea to choose colors that are personally becoming. That being said, there are certain unwritten rules about colors for the workplace about which you need to be aware.

Men: The business colors of choice are blue and gray. Navy blue projects an image of authority. Dress for success in navy and gray -- especially when attending meetings, interviews and presentations. Diversify your wardrobe with suits, jackets and pants in khaki, tan, and taupe. You convey a most formal image in a dark suit and long-sleeved white shirt. Accent your wardrobe with pastel, solid-colored shirts. Choose ties that are a reflection of your personality. The width of the base of the tie should mirror the width of the base of the jacket lapel. For a formal image, choose ties with a neutral background. If formal is not the order of the day, you have more leeway.

Women. Mix and match color-coordinated separates to maximize wardrobe options and stretch your clothing budget. Choose fashion colors or rely on standards -- navy, black, gray, taupe or burgundy for winter and beige or khaki for summer. Select a white or cream colored blouse for your ensemble to create a more formal appearance. Choose styles that are more conservative for business wear with skirt length just above to just below the knee. Tailored pants can easily be substituted for pants and are often a comfortable alternative.

Keep your shoes in top-notch condition. Shoes are one item of clothing that can be very telling. Polished shoes suggest attention to personal grooming. Others will assume you pay attention to detail with all aspects of your life.

When all is said and done, it makes sense to invest in quality, not quantity. Make sure your clothes fit well, are clean and wrinkle-free.

You'll also want to obliterate any 'wrinkles' in your body language. Body language tells others a lot about your attitudes and self confidence. Maintain good eye contact to connect with others and establish trust. Use facial expressions that indicate you are listening and responsive. Smiling is always a plus -- but don't be phony with it. Be relaxed, responsive, and reassuring.

Maintain good posture to add an air of authority. Align your body toward the person with whom you are speaking to let them know they have your undivided attention. Use open body posture to convey confidence. And avoid crossing your arms. This can suggest defensiveness and lack of receptivity.

Develop a firm handshake that demonstrates confidence in yourself. Use hand and arm movements to add strength to what you are saying. And avoid placing your hands around your mouth. It suggests a lack of confidence in your message. Don't fidget unless you want others to think you are nervous or insecure.

Six to 12 seconds isn't much time. But now that you know how to make a great first impression, you are in a position to make those seconds really count.

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