

# Managing Your Image

by BNET Editorial

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Most of us think image management is for PR consultants and celebrities. The truth is that by managing your own image well, you can enhance your reputation as a competent and dependable worker and effective communicator, and thereby, open the door to new career opportunities.

Image management starts with first impressions: people form remarkably strong and persistent opinions of each other within seconds of their first meeting—opinions that are difficult to change. So if you start thinking at the outset about the impression you want to create and how to go about creating it, you will not have the difficult task later of changing an unfavorable impression.

## What You Need to Know

**I believe it's important to be yourself. Aren't you asking for trouble by constructing some fake persona?**

Managing your image is not the same as contriving it. Everything you say and do should feel authentic. Image management means presenting yourself in the best light, not in a false light. We all realize that behavior appropriate in one situation may not be appropriate in another and adjust our behavior accordingly—and often unconsciously. So, whether we are aware of it or not, we already exercise control over the way we behave in different situations—this is just another situation—one in which conscious control can bring enhanced opportunities.

**In my professional life, I want to be judged on the quality of my work, not my appearance. How can anyone know me based on a first impression?**

No one really can: it takes time for others to recognize your personal and professional qualities. Despite that, people still do judge each other almost immediately by appearance—not necessarily by size or shape—but by the way people present themselves. The image you project reveals your motivations and the feelings you have about yourself. If you stand in front of a mirror and act out different scenarios, you will notice real differences in the way you hold your body. Now act out the same scenarios in front of a friend and ask how their feelings about you change in response to your different body postures. Your body language reveals a great deal about you.

**I'm feeling overwhelmed by an important presentation I have to give. How can I create a good impression in these circumstances?**

First, know who will be in the audience and what they expect of you. Aim to meet their expectations. Anticipate what sorts of questions they might ask (include worst-case scenarios) and prepare for them. Rehearse your presentation until you are confident of the material. Be sure to wear comfortable clothes that you feel good in. Go into the presentation confident of success and you will find that you can make it happen.

## **Although I try to manage my image, people seem to misunderstand me. What am I doing wrong?**

You may be misreading the context or misjudging your own behavior. Stop trying so hard and instead observe people who have a natural aptitude for getting people to respond positively to them. You may pick up some clues about where you are going wrong. Alternatively, you could ask for feedback and advice from people you trust on what you could do more successfully.

## **What to Do**

Researchers tell us that an impression is created in the first seven seconds of an encounter and that after that it is extremely difficult to change it. Therefore, you need to learn how to orchestrate those critical few seconds. You may find it helpful to consider the five Cs:

- context
- communication
- credibility
- clothing
- composure/confidence

### **Context**

First, understand the context in which you find yourself, the motivations of those present, and the purpose and circumstances surrounding the occasion. Whether you are being interviewed for a job or conducting an important client meeting, you need to spend time thinking through your audience's expectations and how you will meet them. Should you take risks to distinguish yourself from the others present, or is it time to blend in and demonstrate your compatibility with their values?

### **Communication—Verbal and Nonverbal**

You have analyzed the occasion, so now you need to consider what type of language is likely to be most effective. Good communicators are able to adjust the tone, tenor, and timing of their speech to maximum effect.

NLP—neurolinguistic programming—has a great deal to say on this subject. It advocates listening to the types of words that individuals use; people's words indicate the way they interpret and represent the world. There are five different interpretive modes: visual, kinesthetic, auditory, gustatory, and olfactory, with the first three being the most common.

- Visual: People who “see” things in their mind's eye say things like, “ I can see what you're saying, “ or ”I have a clear vision of what this will look like. ”
- Kinesthetic: Those who make “ sense” of the world through movement, touch, and feelings typically use phrases describing touch or motion, for example, “I get a good feeling about this,” or “The change in market dynamics will be a blow to the business.”
- Auditory: People whose world-view is auditory might say, “I hear what you're saying, ” or “It sounds suspicious to me!”

Choose your approach, if you can, to match that of your audience, or at least use a mixture of the three main interpretive modes so you reach everyone.

Your body (nonverbal) language is as important to creating a positive image as your verbal language and must be consistent with what you say. If you do not believe in your message, your body will show it. This mismatch is called leakage, and you often see it when people are nervous or saying something they know to be untrue. You cannot help but share their obvious discomfort with their message when you see their feet shifting, a knee jiggling, or their use of exaggerated gestures.

Finally, remember to speak clearly and enunciate your words carefully so everyone can hear you without straining. The speed, tone, and pitch of your voice are all signals that will be picked up by your audience.

## **Credibility**

Never bluff. Stick to what you know and use war stories if appropriate to show the depth of your knowledge. Many of us are trained as children not to toot our own horns or boast about our achievements, but you need to find appropriate opportunities to demonstrate the extent of your experience and skills without overdoing it; you need to strike a careful balance between demonstrating your capabilities and being sensitive to how much self-promotion someone can tolerate.

## **Clothing**

Clothes can enhance or destroy a first impression. Extremes—too bright, too flashy, for example—can be a disaster and will paint a picture of you that will stay forever in the observer's mind.

The safest strategy is to reflect the style of those who you meet with, perhaps erring on the side of conservatism. If the context is creative you have more freedom to be idiosyncratic; but if you want to engage with conventional organizational culture, it is best to reflect this in your appearance.

Good grooming is equally vital. Avoid fabrics that show perspiration, an unironed shirt or blouse, and food-stained clothes. Make sure you are neat and clean and well put together.

## **Composure/Confidence**

Composure comes from confidence. When you know what you want and are well prepared, you feel confident and therefore give an impression of composure. This makes it easier to manage the situation, respond flexibly, and roll with the punches.

Just as bad first impressions are hard to displace, so are good impressions. If you invest in conveying a positive image the first time, you need not concern yourself with repairing a poor image later. Just remember to maintain that positive image.

# **What to Avoid**

## **You Try Too Hard at First**

Image management is a subtle skill. A common mistake is to try too hard, exaggerating your natural characteristics in order to convey confidence. The best way to avoid this is to practice in front of a friend or trusted coworker and ask for feedback. Be open to trying different behaviors. If necessary, practice in front of a mirror. Friends and coworkers may lie, but mirrors never will!

## **You Leave It to Chance**

You can unwittingly create a poor image by expecting people to know where your talents or intentions lie without actually telling them. People cannot read your mind, however, and have no way of knowing you unless you reveal yourself. You have to engage actively in creating an image. Find a way of weaving things you want others to know into conversations. Provide people with a hook that they can remember you by. If you appear bland, you will likely be remembered as bland—or not be remembered at all!

## **You Go Too Far**

Misreading a situation and drawing attention to yourself in a negative way can be difficult to recover from. If this should happen, you may find it best to admit your mistake and start again. Few people come back from situations like this without adverse effects.

## **You Forget That Other People Have Networks Too**

Everyone you meet has a network. If you create a good impression, it circulates well beyond your immediate circle and is likely to benefit you in unexpected ways. A poor impression travels just as far and just as fast. Every time you meet someone for the first time, remember that you are meeting not just one person, but potentially that person's entire network of coworkers, contacts, acquaintances, and friends.

## **Where to Learn More**

### **Book:**

Demarais, Ann, and Valerie White. *First Impressions: What You Don't Know About How Others See You*. New York: Bantam, 2004.

### **Web Sites:**

About Human Resources:

<http://humanresources.about.com/cs/communication/a/profimage.htm>