

They've got you pegged - It took 10 seconds

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By Susan Schwartz

That we don't get a second chance to make a first impression is old news. Those of us who judge others based on what they're wearing, how they speak, whether they make too many spelling mistakes in their E-mails or have spinach in their teeth - and we all do judge, in our way - know this.

It's rare to have longer than 10 seconds or so to make a first impression that lasts, Montreal seminar leaders Lynda Goldman and Sandra Smythe observe in [*How to Make a Million Dollar First Impression*](#), their edifying new book, intended to help us navigate the sometimes uncharted waters of work-related etiquette.

According to Albert Mehrabian, a psychologist at the University of California at Los Angeles, 55 percent of first impressions are based on visual criteria, 38 percent on our voices and a mere 7 percent on what we say.

SITTING IN JUDGMENT

Oscar Wilde observed that only shallow people do not judge by appearances. And judge we do, say Goldman and Smythe.

We make all kinds of assumptions about people - about their education, whether they're married, how trustworthy they are, how likely they are to succeed. The business world is a kind of theatre.

"You have to understand your role, so you can decide how to act and how to present yourself." And their book is all about how we should be presenting ourselves.

Some of what they say:

Of all that we wear, our facial expression is the most important. We might think we're expressing concentration when, in fact, a furrowed brow makes people think we're frowning - whereas a genuine smile shows friendliness and interest in others. Yawn, look at your watch during a meeting, jiggle your keys or tap your foot, chew your nails or play with your hair - and you're projecting the message that you're tired, bored or both. Not professional.

Make a strong first impression by being the first to extend your hand. Extend your hand straight; clasp the person's hand firmly; shake firmly once or twice and let go.

Make networking events work for you. Think of memorable introductions, as in: "Hello, my name is Ian Thomas. I can help you keep the world in focus. I'm an optician." The best way to exit a conversation graciously (when you want to be circulating and making other contacts) is simply to say: "It's been great talking to you," shake hands and move on.

Focus on what you say. An exchange cited in the book: "Recently, a young job candidate said to an interviewer: "You're, like, the marketing manager, aren't you?" The reply: "I'm not like the marketing manager. I am the marketing manager."

NAVY WINS

Studies show you're more likely to be hired if you wear a navy suit or jacket to an interview than any other color. Don't over-accessorize.

Self-evident as it sounds, good grooming is important to image. Ask people what turns them off the most when they meet someone new, and most list dirty hair or fingernails, body odor, bad breath and stained clothing.

A concise letter makes a powerful first impression. A poorly formulated one, with typos and errors, makes you look unprofessional.

Any time someone takes more than 15 minutes to do you a favor or help you, send a handwritten thank-you note.

And then there's techno-etiquette. Turn off cell-phones in any enclosed public space, including restaurants. Leave ample margins in faxes. And just because E-mail is fast, it doesn't mean it can be sloppy. Remember E-mail sent from work is not private, so avoid romances, gossip and secrets.

Realize that a business meal is more than eating or drinking. As a guest, don't order alcohol at a job interview.

That Goldman and Smythe felt it necessary to include a section on basic table manners, sadly, says something about their absence:

Order foods easy to eat with a knife and fork. Chew with your mouth closed. Eat bread in bite-size pieces. Don't tip back your chair or wave your utensils. Oh, and if you have to pick spinach from your teeth, go do it in the restroom.