

Why You Made A Lousy Impression – And How To Make Sure It Doesn't Happen Again

✘ *By Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D*

Maybe it was a job interview. Or an important client meeting. Or even a sales call. Whatever it was, you were dressed for success, rehearsed and ready to wow them. So what went wrong?

Chances are you got off to a bad start – and maybe that less-than-positive impression began before you said a word. Here are three small mistakes that might have had big (and negative) consequences:

1. You checked for text messages

You may be familiar with research from Harvard and Columbia Business Schools about the effects of expansive physical poses – feet wide apart, body erect, hands on hips (think “Superman” or “Wonder Woman”). Studies show that holding this kind of “power pose” for just two minutes raises testosterone levels (the hormone linked to power and self-confidence) and lowers the level of cortisol, a stress hormone. But did you know that this hormonal effect is actually reversed when you tuck your chin in, round your shoulders and contract yourself physically? In that posture, you lower your testosterone level – and its corresponding feelings of confidence – while increasing cortisol.

So, instead of hunching over your smart phone (reading email or texting in the classic “iHunch” position) try leaving your phone in your purse or briefcase while you wait in the lobby for an upcoming meeting. Instead, take out a newspaper, and read it sitting up straight with your feet firmly on the floor, and your arms spread wide to hold the paper open. By

putting your body into this expansive posture, you will not only feel more confident and certain when the meeting starts, you will also be perceived that way.

2) You entered the meeting room and adjusted your attitude

In business interviews, first impressions are crucial. Once someone mentally labels you as “likeable” or “untrustworthy,” “powerful” or “ineffectual,” everything else you do will be viewed through that filter. If someone likes you, she’ll look for the best in you. If she mistrusts you, she’ll suspect devious motives in all your actions.

A study at the University of Glasgow’s Centre for Cognitive Neuroimaging that discovered it takes the brain just 200 milliseconds to gather most of the information it needs from a facial expression to determine a person’s emotional state. That’s why you can’t wait until you’re in the meeting room to “warm up.” You’ve got to walk in, already expressing the emotions you want to project.

One way to do that, is to prime your brain – or in the Method Actors’ term, access your “emotional memory” to display a “believable truth.” Of course you will have different goals than an actor in a play, but the sense of conviction and authenticity you want to project is fundamentally the same. For example, if you want to display confidence and positive energy, here’s how you would go about it:

- Think of an occasion where you were confident and successful. This doesn’t have to be taken from your professional life, although I do encourage clients to keep a “success log” so that they can easily find such an event. What’s important is identifying the right emotion.
- Picture that past success clearly in your mind. Recall the feeling of certainty, of confidence, of genuine pride, and remember or imagine how you looked and

sounded as you embodied that emotional state.

- Then, picture yourself at the upcoming meeting with the same sense of confidence and joyful pride of accomplishment. The more you repeat this mental rehearsal – seeing yourself at the upcoming meeting, self-assured and upbeat, the more you increase your ability to automatically produce the facial expressions and body language that is triggered by that authentic, positive emotion.

3) You shook hands

Since touch is the most powerful and primitive nonverbal cue, but it's not enough to shake hands. It's worth devoting time to cultivate a great handshake! The right handshake can give you instant credibility and the wrong one can cost you the job or the contract. So, no "dead fish" or "bone-crusher" grips, please. The first makes you appear to be a wimp and the second signals that you are a bully.

Handshake behavior has cultural variations, but to ace the ideal handshake in North America, follow these guidelines:

Make sure your right hand is free to shake hands. Always shift any briefcases, papers, or cell phones to your left hand before you begin the greeting so your handshaking hand is ready for action.

Offer your hand with your palm facing sideways. When a person offers his hand with the palm faced upwards, it is considered to be a submissive gesture. Conversely, when someone offers his hand with the palm faced downwards (or twists his hand downward during the handshake) it sends a message of superiority. But people who offer a sideways hand to shake send a message of equality and confidence. Don't be overpowering, but do shake hands firmly.

Look directly into the other person's eyes. (A tip is to look at their eyes long enough to know what color they are.)

Smile. Keep your body squared off to the other person – facing him or her fully. Make sure you have palm-to-palm contact and that the web of your hand touches the web of the other person's. Research indicates that if people don't get this full palm contact, they wonder what the other person is hiding.

Start talking before you let go: "It's a pleasure to meet you." Don't look down when you step back. That is a submission signal. By the way: While a great handshake is important for all professionals, it is especially key for women – whose confidence is evaluated by the quality of their handshake even more than it is with their male counterparts.

Drop these three small mistakes and let your body, brain, and touch help you make the most positive impression!

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