



First Impressions: Are You Being Taken Seriously?

A first impression is very hard to change, says Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D., author of *The NonVerbal Advantage*. “During that first encounter, people pick up on certain characteristics almost instantaneously, often without conscious awareness. They may notice our gender, ethnicity, dress, haircut, and the way we shake hands. We can only control some of those characteristics. Everyone brings their own set of personal biases, which they may or may not be aware of.”

Goman says she experienced one form of personal

bias while participating in a yoga class. One of her fellow students told her she resembled a favorite aunt. “It had nothing to do with me, but because of that association she imbued me with positive characteristics. We call that a ‘halo effect.’ Personal biases can be powerful, and they are often under the radar in our consciousness. We may not realize why we like or dislike someone, or why we instantly consider them trustworthy or not.”

Winner’s Body Language

When she speaks to audiences about making

The neural circuitry of first impressions

Neuroscientists at New York University and Harvard University have identified the neural systems involved in forming first impressions of others. The findings, reported in the March 2009 issue of *Nature Neuroscience*, show how we encode social information and then evaluate it in making these initial judgments.

Making sense of others in a social interaction is not easy—each new person we meet may be a source of ambiguous and complex information. However, when encountering someone for the first time, we are often quick to judge whether we like that person or not. In fact, previous research has shown that people make relatively accurate and persistent evaluations based on rapid observations of even less than half a minute.

“Even when we only briefly encounter others, brain regions that are important in forming evaluations are engaged, resulting in a quick first impression,” said Elizabeth Phelps, an NYU professor of psychology and neuroscience and one of the study’s co-authors.

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favorable first impressions, Goman says she asks them to think about what it looks like when a spouse, a friend or a child has a bad day.

“They describe rounded shoulders, a dropped head, and a caved-in chest,” she says. “We know that is how the body wants to respond. If you artificially put your body in that position, you will start to feel defeated.”

Then Goman talks about mimicking the body language of a winner. “When you do that, you feed your brain signals that you have confidence,” she says. “You can even trick your brain into thinking you are having a better day than perhaps you are.”

The Essential Handshake

“Everybody in business should be able to ace a great handshake,” says Goman. “Touch is the most powerful nonverbal signal we can use. When you first meet someone, you want to shake that person’s hand. Create a skin-to-skin, web-to-web contact, palms touching. A handshake should be firm and not limp. You should smile and look at a person long enough to tell the color of their eyes. Just by doing that you will have made a great first impression. A really good handshake will

take you far. It’s not consciously noticed unless it’s truly awful. A strong handshake, along with a smile, gets the other person thinking that there’s something warm and positive and confident about you.”

A Sense of Space

Confidence is conveyed nonverbally through height and space, says Goman.

“Most women don’t have the height and space advantages that men do. Watch and you’ll see how women tend to condense their bodies, whereas men tend to expand, and take up more of the space around them.”

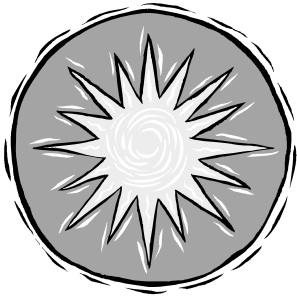
An open body position conveys more confidence than a closed, arms and legs-crossed position, which can come across as resistant, Goman notes. Facing someone directly when you are communicating is

Continued on page 2

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First Impressions: How to Show Confidence and Competence

Continued from page 1

important, too, as even a quarter-turn of the body can give the impression you are giving someone the cold shoulder or cutting them off.

Dress and Act the Part

One of the immediate ways to convey confidence is to dress the part, says Kristina Kihlberg former governor of Toastmasters District 47 serving South Florida and the Bahamas. “Make sure your shoes are shined, your hair is combed and your clothes are clean. That makes you feel good, which makes you more confident. You also want to stand up straight, walk properly and not hang on desks or slouch on a chair.”

Kihlberg, a native of Sweden, found Toastmasters meetings were a good place to practice and improve her English vocabulary and grammar, as well as speaking and listening skills.

Unconscious Signals

realizing it, many people fidget, and these gestures can be detrimental to the impression they make. “Women may play with their hair or jewelry, which can be interpreted as flirtatious—not the signal you want to send if you want to be taken seriously,” says Goman. “Men may fidget by bouncing their legs, which can indicate stress. We all gesture with

our hands, and that’s great to do, as it makes us look more energetic. Unless you’re at a football game, though, you don’t want to gesture too wildly, with your hands above your head—that can come across as erratic and out of control.”

Self Feedback

Watching a video of yourself is the best way to check the first impression you make. Watch it with the sound turned off, and notice whether you are leaning, fidgeting, bouncing or sending any distracting or unprofessional signals. Then practice to perfect a more confident and competent presence.

Resources

- *The Nonverbal Advantage: Secrets and Science of Body Language at Work*, by Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., San Francisco, Calif. (2008) www.nonverbaladvantage.com
- *It's Your Time to Shine: How to Overcome Fear of Public Speaking, Develop Authentic Presence and Speak from Your Heart*, by Sandra Zimmer, Self-Expression Center, Houston, Texas (2009) www.self-expression.com
- Center for Nonverbal Studies www.center-for-nonverbal-studies.org
- Toastmasters District 47 (includes Tampa) www.toastmastersd47.org
- *New Girl on the Job: Advice From the Trenches*, by Hannah Seligson, Citadel Press Books/Kensington Publishing Corp., New York (2007)
- *The First Five Minutes: How to Make a Great First Impression in Any Business Situation*, by Mary Mitchell with John Corr, Wiley, New York (1998)
- *Leave Your Nose Ring at Home: Get the Job You Want by Creating a Powerful First Impression*, by Joe Swinger, Career Press, Franklin Lakes, NJ (2006)

Measure Your Financial IQ

Most people work hard to be responsible with their money and debt management, but sometimes they wonder if they are “doing it right.” Others are seeking new ways to make the most of their income and minimize expenses. And still others try, but might have a sneaking suspicion that they are making some major mistakes. Fortunately, for all of these people, online consumer portal Bills.com offers a free online assessment tool to measure personal finance IQ.

The five-minute online assessment BillsIQ measures five areas of money management: credit, debt, budget, wealth and life plan.

For more insight into managing personal finances and to learn how your progress compares to other people like you, assess your personal finance IQ at www.bills.com/iq.