



BestSummaries



FIRST IMPRESSIONS: WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW ABOUT HOW OTHERS SEE YOU

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Wisdom in a Nutshell

What do people really think about you?

First impressions are complex puzzles. They are formed in an instant, before any kind of physical contact occurs and may last for the next several years. Sometimes, as in the case of once-in-a-lifetime encounters, they last forever.

With careful study, it is possible to identify factors that create good first impressions. By understanding these factors and learning how to make use of them, you can actually change the way people form their impressions of you! This doesn't mean you're going to be "faking it." Rather, It means that with practice and feedback, you will be able to control the image you project to other people. Instead of sitting back and letting others form what might be a wrong impression of you, take that first step and let them make the right impression, the impression you want them to make.

The Lowdown on First Impressions: The Errors, Focus and Gifts

First impressions are nothing specific. Is it a smile? A nod? A handshake? Have you ever felt that despite trying to seem confident and interesting in a social gathering, something is still amiss? You might be under the influence of misconceptions about first impressions. By understanding these factors, how they work and relate to each other, it becomes a simple matter to begin modifying personal behaviors to project a more positive image of yourself.

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of all the perceptions of an
interaction between two people.*

Not All First Impressions Are Accurate: The Errors Of Judging

First impressions form a filter through which people think of how you must be and how you'll act all the time. It is normal. People believe they are good judges of character. There are several errors that arise in this filtering process. The first error is that people tend not to discern between a truly bad personality and just a bad situation. A man who is angry the first time you meet him isn't necessarily always an angry man maybe he just got some bad news. You see it as a personality problem; the man just sees it as a situation. A second error is that an impression creates the "halo effect." When we meet a charming woman, we automatically assume that she is also creative, witty and confident, even if none of her behavior indicates these other qualities. Because we saw her in a primarily good light, we tend to think she is good in every other way. Conversely, if we see a man who seems aloof, we also conclude that he is uninteresting, lacking in social graces and unfriendly.

The Focus: It's All About Making Others Feel Good

A first impression is formed by the interplay of 4 main points of focus:

- How you feel about yourself
- How you feel about others
- How others feel about you
- How other feel about themselves

Whether you realize it or not, a first impression isn't only about you. It is the sum of all the perceptions of an interaction between two people. When we feel good about ourselves, our body language expresses this and people pick up on it. If you don't like the company you are with, your actions show it, even when you think that these actions are imperceptible. A good impression also makes the other person feel good about you.

The fourth focus is a social generosity. When you are able to put your concerns and anxieties about first meetings aside for the moment and focus instead on the concerns and anxieties of the other person, that person is more inclined to feel good about himself and you. The biggest secret is this: good first impressions are all about making others feel good.

What You Give to Others: The Social Gifts

All participants in first encounters have the same goal: you both want to come out of it feeling better about yourselves. You have the power to make others feel better when you share with them the gifts of:

- Appreciation
- Connection
- Elevation
- Enlightenment

These gifts are distinct from each other but work together to boost a person's sense of worth. They all cater to a person's need to feel validated and good about themselves, increasing the likelihood that they'll feel good about you too. The next time you meet someone new, try dropping a compliment, forming a bond, making them laugh and telling them something new. These actions go a long way in making people more comfortable in an already stressful situation.

When you understand and appreciate these concepts, you may actually utilize each gift to your best advantage at any given situation. Different situations call for different approaches to people. Of course, a balance of all these gifts is crucial. You want

to make sure that you do not concentrate on connecting with a person while not elevating or enlightening them in any other way.

The Seven Fundamentals of First Impressions

What exactly does a first impression contain? Breaking down a first impression into seven distinct components allows us to study each part closely and how it makes up a whole. By identifying which "area" of a first impression you need to work on, you can create a stronger, more dynamic first impression.

1. Accessibility

How come no one seems to want to start a conversation with you at a party where you don't know a lot of people? Probably because your body language says, "You don't want to come near me." Let's face it: people pick up even the slightest nuances in your body language. They notice when you don't smile. Accessibility is presenting yourself in such a way that opens doors for further contact. It may be as simple as adapting to the dress code of a social gathering, being more aware of your body language or adjusting to the over-all laid back style of a country community. Looking good is important. It tells others that you take good care of yourself and care about how others see you. Don't worry about the tiny details like whether your socks match or if you have the right color shirt to go with your slacks. Studies have shown that the so-called "social spotlight," where we think people we meet zero in automatically on our worst details, is actually all in our heads.

The Power Of A Good Mood

When you "seem" to be in a good mood, it's easier for people to approach you. Your mood may be determined by your physical energy, facial expression, tone of speech, vocabulary and orientation of focus. For example, if you meet someone for the first time and slump on your chair, have a passive look on your face and use "weak" words such as "boring" and "okay," that person is going to feel that you're not in a very good mood. On the other hand, if you lean forward slightly towards the person speaking, smile and use "strong" words such as "brilliant" and "fascinating," that person will feel that you are in a good mood and feel good about

yourself.

Start A Conversation

Accessibility also means opening that first door towards interaction: starting the conversation. Many of us are prey to allowing others to take control of the conversation while we hold back and try to feel our way through. In many cases though, when the person "feeling" his way becomes comfortable enough to engage in lively conversation, the person who initiated contact would have lost interest by then. The safest topics to open conversations with are subjects that are present within the current situation. This sends the message that you are aware of your surroundings and are safe, providing a subject the other person can also relate to. Refrain from "sexy"

*Being a good listener
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comments. Appreciation for ribald comments in first encounters is highly unusual. Concentrate on opening conversations with a positive note. Starting with, "I hate Florida! It's too warm and the mosquitoes are as big as tennis balls!" only makes you seem whinny and insulting, especially if the other person is a native of the state.

2. Showing Interest

Now that you've opened the door to interaction, what's next? It's showing interest in the other person. Showing interest in others shows that you are not self-centered and that you have a genuine liking for the person you are with. It creates the message that the person is appreciated and you can connect with them.

Your Body Language Speaks Volumes

The first step to showing interest is modifying your body language. Leaning slightly towards the person speaking shows that you are interested in what the person has to say. You may follow it up with a nod, a smile and maintaining eye contact. This lets the other person feel that you find him to be interesting and warm which in turns lets him feel good about himself

and about you. Normal eye contact is maintaining eye contact at least 45-60% of the time.

The Name Game

Have you ever been introduced to a person only to find that you've forgotten her name several minutes later? This shows you weren't particularly interested in her when the introductions were made. People pick up on whether or not you remember their names. It would be inadvisable to keep repeating a name during a conversation, though. Once or twice into the conversation should be enough. Repeating a name incessantly does more harm than good. Asking about a person's name when it sounds unusual is also discouraged. Discussing an ethnic origin of name may not be the most comfortable way to start a conversation.

Ask Me A Question And I'll Tell You Who You Are

A good gauge of how interested you are in a conversation is the kind of questions you ask. Asking close-ended questions such as "did you like it" and "where did you go" make the responder answer in short sentences, stunting the flow of conversation. Instead, ask open-ended questions ("What did you like most about it?") and open doors for more topics of conversation. Avoid questions that focus attention on yourself again. While it is normal to feel anxious about meeting someone new and you feel the need for validation, you must remember that first encounters are all about "making the other person feel good." A better impression is created when you show genuine interest by asking artful questions that show a responder's personality rather than when you boast about your own achievements.

Listen

Being a good listener creates a good impression. To show interest when you listen to someone speak, you may lean forward slightly, nod and say, "Uh huh." Resist the urge to pretend to be listening by going, "Uh huh uh huh uh huh" repeatedly and nodding your head continuously while already planning what you are going to say next and where you will interrupt. People interpret this as your disinterest in what they have to say. By preventing a person from fully expressing his views, you stanch the flow on conversation and come across as being

self-absorbed.

In Response To That...

If someone asks you a question, how do you respond? When asked, "How are you," we know it isn't an invitation to pour out your troubles in detail. It is best to give a short, descriptive response and pave the way for a more interesting conversation. In this case, it is usually the speaker's burden to change or extend the topic of conversation.

The Right Intensity For The Right Situation

You've probably thought about it by now: how much interest must I show to create a good impression? It is one thing to under-do it and another thing to over-do it. When you focus on a person and pepper her with questions to show her your interest in a one-sided conversation, you might show your appreciation for her but she doesn't feel enlightened, as she never got to ask you anything and hear your answer too. She may end up feeling disconnected and form a bad impression of you. On the other hand, if you let her ask all the questions and ask none yourself, she may feel unappreciated and unconnected, thinking that you are not at all interested in her. The best way to go is called "Confident Interest," a good mix of both scenarios, allowing both parties in a conversation to share about themselves and learn more from each other.

I Like You

Flattery works everywhere. Research has shown that people who use one form of flattery or another in the workplace are liked more and receive better evaluations. However, this doesn't mean that you should heap compliment after compliment on someone you just met. She is more likely to feel overwhelmed and wonder about the sincerity of your compliments. It is best to concentrate on one positive quality and compliment that. Direct compliments such as "You look sexy and have a great body" may do more harm than good, as most people are sensitive to such personal comments during first encounters.

3. The Topics of First Conversations

There is no limit to the plethora of topics that may be discussed in the course of a first conversation. There are topics you know a lot about and a passionate about, topics you don't know much of and topics you

know about but don't exactly enjoy. How topics of conversation are taken up, expounded on and changed depend on two conversing parties and how well they interact.

What Do I Start With?

It is common to begin conversations with discussions of the surrounding area and current events before moving on the other, more personal ideas and opinions. This provides a means for providing a level of connection. When two people in a conversation feel that they have the same observations and feelings about where they are and what's happening, they become more comfortable with opening up more about themselves and sharing more personal ideas. In the situation where you've formed a connection by simply being in the same place at the same time (a runner's group meeting, for example), you may jump right into talking about opinions and ideas without having to discuss where you are and why. Throw in a line, generate more topics of conversation and you will be perceived as an interesting, socially aware individual.

But I Don't Know Anything About What He Said...Or Don't Want To Know

What if you don't know anything about a topic? It will happen at times. Perhaps you can ask the other person to expound a little more and then share an observation or idea from his explanation. Not all people who can start and hold conversations anywhere in the world were born with the gift of gab. It comes with practice and quick thinking. When encountering topics you'd like to avoid, remember that it is a social generosity to hear someone out before changing the topic to something that you prefer. Be aware too when other people extend *their* social generosity to you. Interest may be faked but you're bound to notice when your companion is getting bored, a red signal to change the topic.

I'm Scared

Most people who are nervous about first conversations fall into several pitfalls that include lecturing, storytelling, sermonizing and telling too many jokes. At other times, they either talk too much about "heavy" topics such as racial tension, religion or banalities, the nitty-gritty details that only serve to bore a listener and cause a break in the flow of

connection. These traits indicate that you are not comfortable with yourself and need an audience. Taking the time to think about whether or not you are guilty of this and modifying your behavior to include only what is simple and relevant in the conversation will go a long way in creating a favorable impression of yourself.

4. A Little More About Me: Self Disclosure

Self disclosure is a powerful tool. Apart from the other fundamentals of a first impression, this fundamental says the most about yourself and what kind of person you are. Research has shown that most people who disclose more are also liked more and perceived more positively. It is a way of saying, "I trust you enough to be telling you these things about me." Choosing the right aspects of yourself to disclose will provide the person listening one of the most solid bases for forming an impression about you.

Me, Myself And I: What To Share In The First Conversation

All first conversations will require you to share a little more about yourself. But what exactly do you share? As in topics of first conversations, there are no hard and fast rules about what to disclose about yourself.

Self disclosure is a powerful tool.

Generally, a warm-up is used, indicating where you live, your job or how long you've lived in the area, for example. When you've both established a connection, it is easier to share information about oneself in a conversation. How much of yourself you share in a conversation really depends on how comfortable you are in the situation, keeping in mind the norms of social generosity. Take the time to share what is current in your life. Remember that the banalities are best saved for future conversations when a more steady relationship between you and your acquaintance has been established. If you need to disclose more regarding certain topics, your acquaintance will show his interest by asking more questions.

A Word For The Wise

Sticking to the general rules of what topics to discuss in first conversations is a good measure for what you should disclose. Keep it light for now. Instead of disclosing your complaints about someone in your life (called negative egocentrism) focus instead on your passions. Instead of trying to get every detail perfectly, use humor in your blunders. Blunders are sexy. They make the person you are engaged in conversation with feel that you have mistakes too but can laugh about them. This in turn makes them feel more comfortable about themselves and their mistakes. Resist the temptation to brag, name drop or orchestrate ways to include your achievements as a method of disclosing about yourself.

5. Conversational Dynamics

Simply put, it is how much energy you have in a conversation. Five minutes into the conversation, you are in your element because things have been going well. You've both found your connection and the conversation content is filled with interesting insights. Don't spoil it now by putting on too much or too little

*Being too positive may do
more harm than good too.*

energy.

There are people who talk fast and people who talk slow. There are people who show a lot of intensity in their speech and people who tend to be more passive. Friends will more or less have the same energy levels. In a first meeting though, there is a possibility that whoever you are talking to will have a different energy level from yours. Adaptation is important. When you take the time to match your energy level with whoever you are speaking with, be it increasing or decreasing your speed or intensity of speech, the other person will perceive this and make an effort to match your style too. Relax, take time to breathe and listen to the other person if you are a fast talker. If you are a slow talker, concentrate on maintaining the flow of conversation, rather than

getting all your words perfectly.

This doesn't mean that you have to pretend to be a slow talker when you're not in order to gain a favorable impression. It is more likely that you will be perceived as flexible and sensitive to the others' needs, thereby creating an over-all good impression. In conversational dynamics, social generosity yields positive results.

6. The World According To You: Perspective

Whenever you disclose information about yourself, what you are really doing is saying what you think of yourself and of the world.

I'm Not Like Him

No two people have exactly the same backgrounds. You might be working a more dynamic job than your acquaintance. She might be involved in a more interesting hobby. These are facts of life and should be looked at positively. In a practice of social generosity, resist bragging about your job when the other person already feels uncomfortable about his own. In the same light, resist trying to prove that you are better than the other person. Declaring that you've moved on from cruises to enjoying safaris right after the other person says she has just come back from a cruise sounds like you want to top her experience. If you feel over-whelmed about another's achievements, try and ask more about his experiences rather than thinking of ways to come up on top. This conveys the message that you are not self-absorbed or needy. Many people appreciate gestures of modesty from people they have just met. By assuming the one-down position, you automatically gain favor in the eyes of someone new.

Rigidity Doesn't Work

In a stressful situation, many of us make the mistake of being rigid and inflexible. Finding out that a restaurant is out of your favorite dish may make you feel that they are incompetent. Not getting your favorite airline seat may make you irritable. These are minor glitches. They do not affect your well-being or that of the world. Learning to be flexible when such situations arise shows that you are sensitive and "low-maintenance." It shows that you do not put your own wishes ahead of others, creating a better impression of the kind of person you are.

A Bulb That Is Too Bright Will Burn Out Sooner

Just as being too negative won't work towards making a favorable impression, being too positive may do more harm than good too. Being positive doesn't mean you should label everything in a positive manner. An overzealous attempt to say that a person is "fantastic," that all her friends are "great" and that she makes the "best" Caesar's salad can be interpreted as tiring and forced. Instead of stressing an already obviously positive point, try to shift topics to include more interesting topics of conversation directly related to you and your acquaintance.

7. The Subtleties of Sex Appeal

There is a vast difference between sexuality and sex appeal. It is not only about being attractive or possessing desired physical qualities. Your sex appeal is a measure of how interested you are in other people and how responsive you are to them. Whether you will be labeled "fun" or "boring" depends on what physical messages you send.

It's Not Always Flirting

Hold eye contact for just a second longer. Touch the other person in the arm once in the conversation. Smile more. Contribute funny and witty comments to conversations. These actions show that you are comfortable with the other person enough to show these personal gestures. Of course, gender differences may call for you to modify your approach. Researchers discovered that both genders take more pains to try and exude a more positive impression on the opposite gender. What is enough for one won't always be enough for all. By controlling your actions and being sensitive to the other person's reactions, you'll be able to determine how physical you need to get.

You Can't Do Anything About it: Being Comfortable in Your Own Skin

There is more sex appeal in a woman of average build who is comfortable with herself than in a super-model who obsesses over her weight. The "social spotlight" that was mentioned in an earlier section makes us conscious of our physical flaws. As a consequence, we try to make up for them by over-compensating in some other aspect of our personality. And because we are only covering up, we always wonder if anyone else notices. This cycle

only makes the first flaw more noticeable and compounds the problem by adding on more areas we have to gloss over. While you can't control your genes, you can learn to be more comfortable with yourself. Forget about worrying over the ten pounds you have to lose. People won't really notice them. Focus your energies instead on being positive. You might not have high cheekbones but you have nice eyes. You might not have beautiful hair but are talented with picking up languages.

Now That I Know All These, What Do I Do With Them?

Awareness is the first step to changing the way you present yourself. Use what you have just learned to understand yourself better. To gain a full view of the way you present yourself to others and how impressions of you are formed, it is a good idea to try the following steps:

1. Know Your Social Gifts

Do you enlighten people? Do you make them feel appreciated? Identifying which of the four social gifts you are strong at will help you identify which qualities you need to improve on.

2. Explore Your First Impression Fundamentals

Make a check-list of the behaviors you think you exhibit that need improvement and which behaviors are strong points for you. Go through the seven fundamentals and include areas to improve on and maintain for each fundamental. Doing this will provide you with an over-all view of what kind of person you come across as, making it easier to pinpoint qualities you want to attain and retain.

3. Identify Behaviors That Are Your Best and Worst Assets

Don't just think, "Hey, it looks like I give a pretty good impression because I do this..." Think also of what is a recurring faux pas for you when meeting someone new. They might not fall under social gifts or fundamentals but they need improvement just the same. Remember that you are trying to improve on your total presentation, not just one or two qualities.

4. Reflect On Your Secret Sensitivities

All of us have insecurities that we all try to hide when in the company of someone new. But do you try to over-compensate for them unnecessarily? You might think you are bluffing your way through but sometimes, you may come across more

transparently than you think. Do you feel unsure of yourself in a crowd and try extra hard to seem gregarious or withdraw into a shell? These may send off negative messages. Include these behaviors on your list too.

5. Think Of How People Have Responded To You In The Past

Everyone has an idea of how they come across, reinforced by how people have responded to them in past situations. What did you do that made them perceive you in that manner? Was it your body language? Did you hold yourself too stiffly? Did they show interest by asking you more questions?

6. Solicit Feedback About Your Style

Ask a trusted friend about how you come across. Ask her what she has noticed about you when you meet people for the first time. Ask for both positive feedback and what you can improve on. Draw her out by asking questions like, "Do I come off as being...?" Never react by being defensive ("I do NOT do that!!"). She isn't trying to attack you. She is only trying to offer the help you asked for.

7. Synthesis

Now that you have your list and feedback from a friend, try to create a picture of the impression you must be giving off. Concentrate on just one or two positive and negative qualities that you would like to retain. Keep in mind that creating a good impression isn't about pleasing everybody. It is about controlling the kind of image you *want* to present to others.

8. Explore Your Style "Ideal"

Would you like to be able to respond more effusively in a conversation? Would you like to be able to improve on your body language? What kind of messages do you want to send? Is there anyone in particular whose style you admire?

9. Identify Obstacles To Being Your Ideal

Go through your list and identify weaknesses that are obstacles to attaining the style ideal you want to achieve. Maybe you would like to be able to converse more naturally but find difficulty in choosing topics. Maybe you'd like to be able to smile more but feel shy about your teeth. Identify those weaknesses that are directly related to your style ideal and are important to you.

I'm Ready To Be A Better Me: Closing The Gap

You already know what you need to improve on. You already know the kind of impression you want to be making. The last step is actually going through the exercise of changing your style.

It's All In Your Head: Psyche Yourself Up For It

It may all seem daunting but psyching yourself up to start is probably the most difficult aspect of improving on and attaining your style ideal. Instead of thinking of the multitude of behaviors you have to change, start by deciding to improve on just one and then go down the list when you are comfortable with your new self. Change your habits to accommodate your more informed choice of how to present yourself. Change may be uncomfortable. After all, you are charting through unknown territory. Remind yourself that these are all investments in your future. As they say: no pain, no gain.

Just Do It!

Start now. Don't wait for the next party or the next stockholder's meeting. Talk to the grocer or chat with the UPS delivery man. There are plenty of everyday situations that are low-risk and safe. If you think you'll never see the person sitting next to you on the train anyway, what do you have to lose, right? Whether you decide to take small steps like learning how to maintain eye contact or big steps like learning to strike up a conversation when you are painfully shy, there is no better time to do it than now.

Step Forward...

Create goals for yourself. Decide to smile to at least five people everyday. Challenge yourself by deciding not to dominate every conversation you have. Setting goals provides a step by step way to improving yourself. It encourages you to move forward, especially when you realize how easy it was to achieve that last goal.

And Then Step Back

Reassess yourself every so often. Are people responding to you more? Are you feeling more comfortable with yourself? What other behavior would you like to improve on next? Awareness helps you decide what new goals you should create and aim for. Challenge yourself when you find that you

can reach your goals.

not easy but by judging too quickly, you limit your opportunities for developing stronger, more meaningful relationships with others.

I'm Sorry: Overcoming A Bad Impression

It happens. You do or say something unintentional and you form a bad impression. Keep a positive frame of mind and know that you can get through this. Reflect on what you could have done better and remind yourself in future situations to *be* better.

What Can I Do To Make It Better?

There are several ways you can approach overcoming a bad impression that is made of you. You can apologize directly and ask for a second chance. This shows that you are aware that you are wrong and want to make up for it. It shows humility and acceptance. On the other hand, you can also wait for time to show you in a more favorable light. You can try the pro-active approach and try to study the other person's style. Perhaps you can find a way to complement his style. Remember, first impressions are sometimes wrong. They may be overcome.

Others Do It Too: Cut Them Some Slack

If you make mistakes, others do too. Now that you are familiar with the erroneous assumptions first impressions make, acknowledge that *you* may be making these mistakes too. We are quick to judge others based on the filters we create, what we see in an instant and what they remind us of, be it of ourselves or other people we don't like. Sometimes, we pass judgment without even fully realizing that the other person is not guilty of it at all! In one study, researchers showed that when we make bad impressions of other people, it doesn't mean they did anything wrong. More than likely, we were merely distracted by other concerns.

Before judging a fellow, consider his intentions. He might only be feeling nervous in your presence and you interpret it as being uninteresting and unconfident. She might be trying to convey that she is comfortable with you by sharing more personal information and you interpret it as being needy. Take the time to let a pattern of behavior emerge before making a bad impression of someone. It is