

How to Conquer the First Impression **Laura Morsch, CareerBuilder.com writer**

When you walk into an interview, remember this: It only takes 30 seconds to make a lasting impression.

Research has shown that the first impression you make on an interviewer really sticks. In one study, untrained subjects were shown 20- to 32-second videotaped segments of job applicants greeting their interviewers. When the subjects rated the applicants on attributes like self-assurance and likeability, their assessments were very similar to the interviewers' -- who had spent more than 20 minutes with each applicant.

Fortunately, there are some actions you can take to help master the first impression:

Timing

Few things give a worse impression than showing up late for an important meeting. Allow yourself plenty of time to get to the interview in case you have trouble finding the office.

But earlier isn't necessarily better. If you arrive more than 15 minutes early and beeline for the reception area, your interviewer might feel rushed and you might appear desperate, according to Emily Post's book "The Etiquette Advantage in Business." If you arrive early, go to the restroom to freshen up or have an espresso and muffin at a nearby coffee shop.

Ideally, you should check in five to 10 minutes early, and always be courteous and professional to everyone you meet -- you never know how much influence the receptionist may have on the hiring decision.

Appearance

Like it or not, people make judgments on appearances, so it's important to arrive at the interview looking like a seasoned professional. But if you dress too formally, you'll look stuffy, and if you dress too casually, the interviewer may think you're not serious about the job.

Never wear anything sloppy, tight or revealing to an interview. High-quality, tailored business suits are always appropriate for both men and women. And don't forget the details: Make sure your shoes and any other accessories are clean and polished. Clothes may make the (wo)man, but hair and hygiene are crucial. You never want an interviewer to smell you before they see you, so always bathe the morning of the interview, use a good-quality bath soap and deodorant, and avoid wearing perfume or cologne.

Be sure your hair is clean and well-groomed -- nothing spiky or wild -- and keep your makeup minimal. Cover any tattoos, and limit visible piercings to one in each earlobe.

Handshake

According to Emily Post's book, your grip speaks volumes. Offer a limp hand and your partner will think you're hesitant or meek. Give a bone-crunching squeeze and you can appear overly enthusiastic or domineering -- and it hurts! But when you shake with a medium-firm grip, you convey confidence and authority.

Extend your hand and grip when the webs of your palms touch. Then, pump your hand a couple of times.

Body language

Don't underestimate the importance of your posture and subtle movements. A study by Albert Mehrabian of UCLA found that 55 percent of communication is received from body language.

To ensure your body language signals your confidence, sit up straight with your shoulders back. Avoid crossing your legs and don't adopt a casual pose -- even if your interviewer does.

Even if you're nervous, try not to fidget. Don't play with your jewelry, twirl your hair or cross your arms, and try to maintain eye contact with the interviewer. If staring straight into the interviewer's eyes makes you uncomfortable, look at the bridge of his or her nose instead -- it looks like you're still making eye contact, but might be less distracting.

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