

Make First Impressions Count

No matter what the social event—whether it's a social gathering, business meeting, or company function—you're meeting new people and sizing them up. And they're doing the same with you. Did you know that people make judgments about each other within the first minute they meet? Those first impressions can easily become lasting impressions. So what do you want those first few seconds to say about you?

When first impressions make the difference, it's important to understand how you come across to others. Randall S. Hansen, Ph.D., is the founder of Quintessential Careers, a leading career development site. He shares his tips and insight on the way we impact people, whether it's in person or on paper.

First Impressions Made in Person

Attire

Whenever you're meeting people for the first time, whether you're networking, attending a business meeting, or dating, it's essential to look the part. In other words, dress for the specific occasion, even if it means doing a little research up front. Think of how you want to be perceived by the people you're about to meet and dress accordingly, advises Dr. Hansen.

Grooming

Hair should be neat; not the wind-tunnel look. For women, less makeup is always better than too much, and a light perfume or cologne is acceptable, but be careful of overwhelming the people in the room with the scent. Keep in mind that being well-groomed can make people think you're efficient and reliable, while being unkempt and untidy makes people think you're disorganized.

The Handshake

Make it simple. Extend your right hand and grasp their hand gently but firmly. No bone-crushers, and certainly no four-handed, one-hand-over-the-other shakes. Definitely no sweaty, clammy, or wimpy handshakes, either. If necessary, carry a handkerchief in your pocket and wipe your hand before you do the meet and greet.

Conversation

The world doesn't revolve around you, and neither should your conversations. Be sure to engage the other person when you talk, and use their name for emphasis. You can, of course, talk about yourself, but don't make the whole conversation about you, and keep stories short. Look for

common ground with the person you're talking to, and share stories about that common interest.

Attitude

Nothing works better in any situation than having and expressing a positive attitude. Let your enthusiasm for any new situation show, and leave your problems at the door.

First Impressions Made on Paper

Cover Letters

Your cover letter might be someone's first impression of your personality and professionalism. Keep it short—that means no more than four or five brief paragraphs. In your first paragraph, create a dynamic and powerful opening that explains why you are writing. Always address the letter to the recipient by name. "To whom it may concern" shows that you have little knowledge or interest in the company. What's the worst mistake you can make? Misspelling the person's name. Second worst mistake? Misspelling anything else. After all, if you're not careful about your own business, why would anyone think you'll take care of theirs?

Résumés

Aim for a single-page résumé, but don't cram every single detail into a page with zero margins and tiny type. Make use of white space and go to an additional page only if absolutely necessary. Organize your résumé to reflect your most recent job at the top and include dates of employment. Use bulleted sentences, not paragraphs, to describe your work experience. Résumés are read quickly, and bulleted sentences are easier to read than long paragraphs. And be sure to spell check carefully. Misspellings and grammatical errors tell employers you aren't detail oriented.

Business Cards

For business card first impressions, the most important element is the design and format. Except in special circumstances such as creative professions, colors—of the paper and the text—should be conservative. The same holds true with the typeface—use basic fonts that are easy to read. The design should be simple and tasteful, advises Dr. Hansen. And it should include your key contact information.