

# Make a Good Impression at a Job Interview

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Julie is well qualified for the beginning-level job in a large company. She arrives on time, wearing a brightly coloured blouse and skirt and open-toed sandals. She is nicely dressed – for a party. Unfortunately, the message she sends is that she is not “serious” and ready for the job market. Alan is interviewed the next day for the same job. He is intelligent and equally well qualified. Unfortunately he arrives late for the interview because he couldn’t find a parking spot. He enters the meeting feeling flustered, and because he is nervous, he forgets to shake the interviewer’s hand. Neither Julie or Alan get the job, not because they are unqualified, but because they failed the “first impression” test.

Before you open your mouth and say your first words at a job interview, the interviewer has already formed a first impression of you. This first impression is visual, and it is instantaneous. The interviewer has noted your overall appearance, including how you are dressed, the way you carry yourself, your facial expression, and your grooming. A lot to size up in an instant? Of course. But we are visual creatures, and we all make these instant judgments when we meet others, whether we are conscious of them or not.

Albert Merhabian, a UCLA psychologist, conducted experiments that revealed how people perceive each other. He found that first impressions are based on the following criteria: 55 percent is visual; 38 percent is for our voices, and a mere 7 percent is for what we say.

What does this mean for you? It certainly doesn’t mean that all your education and training are useless, or that what you say during an interview is irrelevant. It simply means that paying attention to your body language, manner and clothing choice can give you the winning edge. People aren’t hired solely because they look the part, but many are turned away if they don’t look like they will fit in to the company.

When you’re on the job market, make sure to dress for the job you want. Every industry has a dress code, and every company has its own corporate culture. Don’t assume that you need a conservative suit for every job. Showing up at an ad agency or high-tech company in a banker’s blue suit can be as much of a problem as being underdressed in a conservative industry such as financial services. Ask others you know who work in similar jobs how they dress. If you are not sure what is expected, phone the human resources department to ask about the dress code. There is no such thing as neutral clothing. Everything you wear shows a decision you made. Your physical appearance is your visual resume.

When meeting recruiters and potential employers, make sure you are impeccably groomed. This goes beyond being freshly showered. Make sure your clothes are clean and crisp, with no loose buttons or threads, food stains or hems falling down. Your teeth should be freshly brushed, and fingernails should be clean and shaped. Your hair and shoes are noticed first, so make sure your hair is squeaky clean and styled, and your shoes are not scruffy or worn down at the heels. Women should wear a light touch of makeup that is understated but polished. Men should be clean-

shaven or have facial hair neatly trimmed. Remember that it's the details that count, and bad grooming is a major turn-off.

Pay attention to your body language. We are often anxious before meeting a potential employer, and our faces may show it. Take a deep breath, try to relax, and remember to smile. When you first meet a recruiter or potential employer, step towards the person, make eye contact, smile and offer your hand for a handshake. A good handshake is firm but not bone-crushing. Meet palm-to-palm, and web-to-web. Some people are uncertain about what to do, and keep shaking for too long. Two or three shakes are sufficient. Remember that initiating a handshake is a sign of confidence, and in today's gender-neutral business world, either a man or woman can initiate a handshake. And don't chew gum or wear any kind of cap or hat that obscures your face. They both make communication difficult, and leave a negative impression.

Be prepared so you don't have to search for things under pressure. Organize your papers and resume, have a pen and notebook handy, and know where your business cards are located. That way you won't fumble under pressure.

Plan to arrive about 10 minutes before the interview. If you arrive too early the interviewer may feel rushed. Needless to say, never be late for a job interview. It's a good idea to find out exactly where the office is located and think about transportation. If you are driving, you can ask where parking is available. Then allow time to get upstairs if your appointment is on the 30<sup>th</sup> floor of an office tower. If you are taking public transportation, allow enough time for unexpected delays. Giving yourself this extra window of time will allow you to arrive fresh, rather than feeling stressed and worried about being late. If you arrive extra early, you can always take a few minutes to have a coffee or sit down somewhere and relax before the interview.

When you arrive, greet the receptionist and give your name. While you wait, you can read any company information that is available. Any extra knowledge you have about the company can help you land the job. Don't pull out a pocketbook or mystery novel, and become so engrossed in it that you don't notice the interviewer approach!

When the interviewer arrives, stand up, introduce yourself, and shake hands. Make sure you greet the person with a smile, and make eye contact. During the interview, be sure to maintain eye contact as well. This doesn't mean staring into the interviewer's eyes, but it does mean focusing attention on the person you are speaking to. Don't let your eyes wander all over the room, or attempt to read the files on the interviewer's desk.

In the interviewer's office, he or she will indicate where you should sit. Be careful not to invade the interviewer's space. Keep your briefcase or purse on your lap or on the floor beside you, and don't spread your papers over the interviewer's desk. At the conclusion of the interview shake hands and thank the interviewer for taking the time to see you. Send a brief "thank you" note the next day. It will set you above the crowd.

Before your next job interview or networking event, prepare yourself both physically and mentally. When you feel confident, you'll project a polished, professional image, and you'll be much more likely to land the job you want.

Lynda Goldman, author of "How to Make a Million Dollar First Impression" provides articles and corporate writing, as well as training and materials for corporations and associations, on business image, business dining and networking.

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