

Make Your First Impression

YOUR BEST IMPRESSION

Learn the secrets of verbal and non-verbal communication and what your physical appearance says about you.

BY ANNA SOO WILDERMUTH

EVERY SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS invests a tremendous amount of money to create a high value for its products and services. The most successful and respected companies and executives go one step farther—they invest in the image of their most important asset, themselves and their employees. Our visual appearance and subsequent verbal and non-verbal communications create an instant and lasting impression. The appropriate image not only elicits a positive reaction from clients, but also boosts self-esteem and success. I learned this early in my career.

When I started as a residential realtor, I was the youngest salesperson in my office. During my first year, I worked 60 to 80 hours a week and made only \$117.92. I eventually realized that my image was holding me back from success and that even my best efforts could not overcome this. I had long, wild, hair; wore long, flowing skirts and lots of jewelry. I talked and moved very fast. I looked and acted as if I belonged at a '60s rock concert. My image did not convey trust and professionalism.

Once I realized this, I knew I had to either change careers or adjust my professional style. I chose to do the latter. I cut

my hair, got rid of the excess jewelry, wore suits to work, and learned to mirror my customer's communication style. Suddenly, clients felt comfortable with me and were confident about my real estate knowledge. The following year, I sold \$1 million of property and never looked back. On and off for 14 years, I was a top-selling residential realtor. When I left the business in 1986, I was a lifetime member of the \$2 Million Club.

For the last 16 years, I have helped executives from Fortune 100 companies to entrepreneurs build successful business relationships by forming their professional image strategies and appreciating the nuances of business social etiquette.

The key to selling yourself is to love what you do. People want to be with people who are happy and have a positive attitude. The four weighted elements that contribute to making your first impression your best impression are:

- Non-verbal communication or body language: 30%
- Physical appearance: 30%
- Verbal communication: 20%
- How well you read people: 20%.

The first three secrets are easy to control.

The secrets of non-verbal communication

The way you enter a room and greet people tells them a lot about you. A raised eyebrow, a sudden smile or a nervous gesture often reveals more than spoken words. If you want to make a good first impression:

- Concentrate on maintaining good posture. This conveys an air of confidence.
- Make good eye contact and hold it for several seconds. This creates an instant connection.
- Have a ready, natural smile.
- Be sure your handshake is firm.
- Always allow one arm's length of space between you and the person to whom you are talking.
- Keep your breath fresh (use breath strips) and avoid wearing heavy colognes.

The secrets of physical appearance

The four A's of a successful image are that your appearance must:

- Make your feel **attractive**.
- Be **appropriate** for the situation and profession.
- Make you feel self-**assured**.
- Be **affordable** in terms of time and money.

Today's improving economy has created a highly competitive business environment. Professional image is moving toward a more structured defined look even in business casual offices.

Trends for Men

- Hairstyles are shorter in cut.
- Long sleeve, oxford, cotton shirts are back, replacing the short sleeve cotton polo shirt.
- Dark colors exude power.
- The under-40 set is combining suits with bolder ties and stripes to define their style.
- The over-40 set is adding shirts with more color to their wardrobe.
- Blue shirts convey a more business-like influence.
- White shirts are the choice when making a formal presentation.
- Cuffs are in for casual slacks.

Trends for Women

- Longer hair is in, but worn away from the face.
- Collarless knit tops are replacing shirt style blouses.
- Navy, burgundy, and dark brown suits are replacing the black suit.
- Heels are replacing flat shoes.

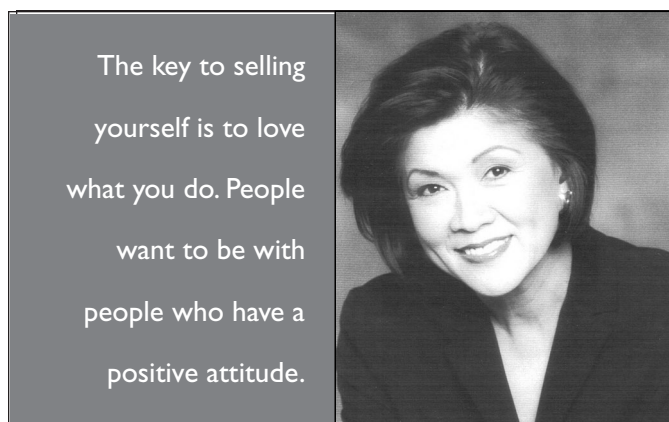
When accessorizing, always remember that details maximize the impact. High quality accessories in impeccable condition will raise your image to the next level. Your shoes, belts, briefcases, and purses should be leather, or high quality micro fiber. The watches and jewelry you choose should

highlight your style, while conveying elegance and quality.

The secrets of verbal communication

Your personal commercial—how you make small talk, remember names and make introductions—is instrumental to the success of your first impression.

- Prepare a 60-second personal commercial. Include your name, the company you work for or own, what you do, how it benefits people and what makes your company or product different. Deliver your personal commercial with confidence and in conversational style. Add a personal story—something interesting about yourself that will help others better understand what you do and get to know you better.
- When making small talk, start easy. Discuss a great book you just read, a movie you just saw or a restaurant



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you enjoy. Never talk about politics, religion, sex or diet. Be sensitive; test the personality of the person you first meet. Ask an easy question and respond with the same energy.

- Help yourself remember someone's name by repeating it when introduced to them, at least once during conversation, and again when you tell them it was a pleasure to meet them.

Your mastery of verbal and non-verbal communication, appropriate clothing choices, and ability to make small talk will attract the attention of others. You, in turn, make those around you feel good about themselves. You will always be able to walk into a room, look the world in the eye and make your first impression your best one.

Anna Soo Wildermuth, AICI, CIM, is the founder of Personal Images Inc., an image, communication and etiquette specialist. Anna has been a recognized leader in the image industry since 1988. She has been highlighted in the Chicago Tribune, quoted as an image expert in Success and Chicago Magazine, featured on television's CNN-Financial and Fox News Chicago. She can be reached at 630.530.9440 and anna@personalimagesinc.com.
