



## The Power of First Impressions

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How many times have you heard, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression?”  
How many times have you said it? Do you believe it?

### The Power of an Impression

An “impression” is a mark, indentation, or figure produced by pressure. This impression is a strong effect produced on one’s intellect, feelings, or conscience. Therefore, a first impression is the mark you make in the first moments of interacting with someone. Initial encounters are emotionally concentrated events. You walk away from them with a first impression that is like a Polaroid picture – a head-to-toe image that develops instantly and never entirely fades.

### What impression are you making?

The brain is immensely perceptive and takes into account every minor detail of one’s facial features. The sight and sound around us are picked up by sense organs and the signal is passed to the brain. These signals are then compared to the memories of past experiences. The interpretations of the signals play a key role in forming the first impression.

There are three primary characteristics that affect the initial engagement – warmth, competence, and physical attractiveness. Within seconds of the first encounter, one’s brain is

interpreting signals that relate to these characteristics and play the key role in forming the first impression. Warmth is best reflected by one's outlook and attitude. Competence comes across through verbal communication. And physical attractiveness is all about appearance. The "Warmth and Competence Model" is universally accepted as to how humans perceive and judge each other. According to Chris Malone, Chief Advisory Officer of the Relational Capital Group ([www.relcapgroup.com](http://www.relcapgroup.com)), this model has been researched and validated across 19 countries and cultures around the world and found to be an instinctive human thought process that aided survival and continues to be the way we perceive people, products and services today.

The model is as follows: In encounters with others, people must quickly determine whether the "other" is a friend or foe (i.e., intends good or ill). And, then, whether the other has the ability to enact those intentions. People perceived as warm, competent and attractive elicit uniformly positive emotions and behavior, whereas those perceived as lacking warmth, competence and attractiveness elicit negativity. Recent research has shown that warmth, competence and attractiveness explain over 80% of how people perceive each other; and nearly 90% of the strength of business relationships.

Appearance is the primary aspect of an individual's personality that meets the eye. An unkempt look, body odor or bad breath top the chart in casting a poor impression. Communication skills fall next in line. Articulation influences the first impression as it implies intelligence, educational background and technical competence. Apart from words, voice modulation, pitch and gestures also hold significance. Wandering eyes or fidgety gestures demonstrate a lack of interest. A sloppy posture, avoiding eye contact, shaky voice and nervousness are prime hindrances to a positive first impression.

During the first encounter, your focus must be on the other person – not yourself. Make the other person the center of attention and importance and begin the interaction on the right note. Give the individual the opportunity to speak with emphasis on being a good listener. The skills of good listening include stable eye contact and affirmative verbal clues that show that you are interested in learning more.

### **The Power of a Smile**

Like it or not, judgments based on facial appearance play a powerful role in how we treat others, and how we are treated. Psychologists have found that traits such as likeability, competence, and trustworthiness are interpreted in facial expressions. Your smile is most important. When you smile, you are likely to get a warm reception. It is hard for the other person not to reciprocate.

Researchers at the University of California Medical School in San Francisco say we can pick up a smile from 30 meters away. If you wait until you are shaking someone's hand, it might be too late. It's also always a good idea to smile when you make a call, regardless of who you might be speaking with. The warmth of a smile creates a positive first impression!

It is traditionally said that 7% of the meaning of a communication comes from the words themselves while another 38% is based on tone of voice and the remaining 55% on body language. Are your arms crossed? Are you leaning back? Or, are you smiling, engaged in the conversation, leaning forward, and nodding?

### A Word About Dress

A picture is worth a thousand words. So, the “picture” you present says much about you to the person you are meeting for the first time. Your dress sends a message about you, your skills and your organization. While it only takes a few seconds to form a first impression, more than half of the first impression is based on appearance. You must ask yourself, “Is my appearance saying the right things to help me create a positive first impression?”

Professional dress is a critical component to you and your organization’s brand. Maintaining a competitive edge requires that you and your staff sustain a consistent visual impression with those whom you serve. Dressing in a professional manner garners respect from the other person. Appropriate dress makes a good first impression. It also allows you to feel confident and poised. If you want to be taken seriously, you must dress for success.

### Top Ten Strategies to Create a Positive First Impression

Because the first impression of you often lasts a long time and impacts your relationships, it is essential that you consider the following top ten strategies in creating a positive first impression:

1. **Be on time** – Someone you are meeting for the first time is not interested in your “good excuse” for running late. Arriving early is much better than arriving late and serves as the first step in creating a positive first impression.
2. **A winning smile** – Smile and the world smiles too. There is nothing like a smile to create a good first impression. A warm and confident smile will put both you and the other person at ease.
3. **Body language** – When it comes to first impressions, body language speaks louder than words. Stand tall, smile, make eye contact and greet with a firm handshake. Your body language projects confidence and self-assurance. If you are calm and confident, the other person will feel comfortable.
4. **Dress for success** – Physical appearance matters. The person you are meeting with for the first time does not know you. Your appearance is usually the first clue he or she has to go on.
5. **Be positive, courteous and attractive** – A positive attitude helps to create a good first impression. It also goes without saying that good manners and polite, attentive and

courteous behavior will enhance the manner in which you are perceived. Turn off your cell phone and give the new acquaintance 100% of your attention. Manners really matter!

6. **Do your homework** – Learn as much as possible about the person you are about to meet for the first time. The other person will be impressed that you took the time to learn about them. Google and LinkedIn are excellent research tools. Doing your homework demonstrates your conscientious nature.
7. **Be a good listener** – What do people enjoy more than anything in the world? Talking about themselves, their goals, passions, hobbies, family, business, etc. Your listening skills will create a positive first impression and get the relationship off to a great start.
8. **Bring an agenda** – If your first encounter is a business meeting, come prepared with an agenda. The agenda demonstrates that you value the other person's time. When they see their company's logo on the agenda, it shows you are willing to go the extra mile.
9. **Eye contact** – As your focus must be on the other person, eye contact is essential. To make a good impression, you must have the other person's complete attention. Your focused eyes demonstrate interest and respect. Wandering eyes show disrespect.
10. **Visualization** – Mentally rehearse your initial encounter before it takes place. See yourself smiling, relaxed and connecting with the other person. Visualize how a positive meeting will unfold. Visualization is a strategy used by successful people in all walks of life including, but not limited to, entertainers and athletes. Mental preparation has positive impact and results.

You've heard you never get a second chance to make a first impression; now you know how to make your first impression a great impression.

#### About the Author

Scott Addis, CPCU, CRA, CBWA is the CEO of Beyond Insurance and is recognized as an industry leader having been named a Philadelphia finalist for *Inc. Magazine's* "Entrepreneur of the Year" award as well as one of the "25 Most Innovative Agents in America." Beyond Insurance is a consulting firm that offers leadership training, cultural transformation, and talent and tactical development for enlightened professionals who are looking to take their practice to the next level. Since 2007, the proven and repeatable processes of Beyond Insurance have transformed individuals and organizations as measured by enhanced organic growth, productivity, profitability, and value in the marketplace.