

Law Firm Administration A Special Report

That Indelible First Glance

Initial impressions really count with clients, colleagues, the press.



BY OLIVIA FOX CABANE

You only get one chance to make a great first impression. Within a few seconds, with just a glance, people have determined your social and economic level, your level of education, and even your level of success.

Within minutes, they've also assessed your intelligence, trustworthiness, competence, friendliness, humility, and level of confidence. Although these evaluations happen in an instant, they can last for years—first impressions are often indelible.

As experience often proves our first impressions correct, we tend to trust them. One Harvard professor, Dr. Nalini Ambady, compared evaluations of a two-second video clip of a teacher with the evaluations of students who'd had this teacher for a full semester. Both sets of evaluations were astonishingly similar.

Another reason why first impressions are so long-lasting is our need to appear consistent with other judgments we've made. According to Dr. Robert Cialdini's groundbreaking work on the matter, once we've made a judgment about someone, we spend the rest of our acquaintanceship seeking to prove it correct; we want chances, in other words, to confirm what we originally believed. "Faced with the choice between changing one's mind and proving there is no need to do so, almost everyone gets busy on the proof," said economist John Kenneth Galbraith. How right he was.

TIP THE SCALES

This is why first impressions are so crucial—everything we see and hear afterward gets filtered through our initial opinion. Make a favorable impression when first meeting a client, and the rest of your working relationship will be filtered through it, thereby tipping the scales in your favor.

On the other hand, an unfavorable first impression can prove impossible to overcome and will often decide the outcome of a request for proposal (RFP) even if the rest of the pitch was impeccable. Litigators know well how much their client's first

impression on a jury can affect the outcome of the trial, and often spend hours preparing the client.

First impressions matter at all stages of a career. They're vital when, as a new associate, you meet your peers and seniors for the first time. What indelible impression do you want to leave with them? They're crucial when, as a senior-level associate and then as a partner, you increase your level of client contact.

First impressions also matter throughout a client relationship, for instance during on-site visits, when you will necessarily run into new faces. All lawyers, as they go about business development, need to pay close attention to the first impressions they're making.

For managing partners—whose position has been described as "being the only fire hydrant in a neighborhood of 90 dogs" or "in the business of herding cats"—it is vital to start off on the right foot. You need your cats to like you, respect you, trust you, or whatever other impressions are necessary within the culture of your firm to get people to do what you need them to do. You'll be continually meeting partners for the first time: from the moment you're made managing partner, as associates are promoted, as lateral hires are made, as practice groups are brought in, or when mergers are initiated.

First impressions will matter when you meet the press, should you ever face a PR issue. In this case you'll be dealing with notoriously quick-to-judge journalists. Should you be televised, it will be a matter of the first impression you make on a very large audience. You are the face of the firm, so your first impression can carry quite a bit of weight.

So how do first impressions happen, anyway? Dr. Ambady believes they are generated in the most primitive area of the brain, the same area that processes feelings. They are based on instinct and emotion, not thought or logic.

In ancient times, humans often had only a split second to determine if the shape coming into their fields of vision was animate or inanimate, human or nonhuman, friend or foe. In other words, fight, flight, or relax? Those who could make these split-

second decisions survived. Today, basically, we're still operating on cave-man instincts.

When first meeting someone, we immediately assess outward appearance: height, race, age, clothing, etc. Then we notice demeanor, including facial expressions and body language. It is only afterward that the content of the conversation and the way it's said (choice of words, accent) come into play.

GOLDEN RULE

So how can you make a fantastic first impression? The "golden rule" is actually quite simple; people like people who are like them. When people are similar in dress styles, appearance, demeanor, and speech, they automatically assume they are equally similar in social level, education, and even values—and they tend to like each other pretty quickly.

Some things you have little control over, such as race, height, or age. Hairstyles, clothing, and accessories, however, are entirely your choice. How much can you adjust to the people you are meeting? You wouldn't wear a Hawaiian shirt to an investment bank, nor would you wear a three-piece suit at an advertising agency. A tax lawyer might not wear the same suit as an entertainment lawyer.

Body language and facial expressions are among the most important aspects of first impressions. Your body is a 24-hour broadcasting station, revealing precisely how you feel at any given moment. Right now—from the crinkle of your forehead to the angle of your feet—you're sending out information to anyone around you.

Unfortunately, you can't control this vital part of the process consciously. Like your heart and breathing, it is usually controlled by your subconscious mind. One interesting thing about the subconscious mind is that it does not distinguish between imagination and reality.

FIGHT OR FLIGHT

Have you ever felt your heart pounding and your blood curdling during a scary movie? Consciously, you know it's fiction. But your subconscious mind sees gore on the screen, and it sends you straight into fight-or-flight mode because it believes everything it sees to be real. This is the reason techniques such as visualization work so well; professional athletes will spend hours rehearsing their victory, telling their subconscious mind just what they want their body to achieve.

That strategy, in short, is a highly efficient one to get your body language to broadcast exactly the impression you want it to. Simply feed your subconscious mind the message you want it to pour out. For instance, if you want to broadcast trust and friendliness when meeting someone, all you need to do before you walk into the room is to imagine a cherished friend, someone with whom you have a wonderful relationship.

To make it effective, involve all five senses. Hear the laughter you shared, taste the beer you drank, smell the wood fire. Do this for just a minute and a remarkable chain reaction, from the softening of your eyebrows to the dilatation of your pupils, will broadcast a message of trust and liking. You'll instinctively smile, which is one of your most powerful tools. Dr. Paul Ekman, the leading expert on facial expressions, assures us that we can pick up a smile from as far away as 30 feet.

Another way to ensure a great first impression is to synchronize your body language with the other person's. When people like each other, they unconsciously start to behave in a similar manner, synchronizing their actions. You want to mirror the body language; if he moves his left hand, you move your right. You can synchronize posture, particular gestures such as head tilts and nods, facial expressions, and breathing. People won't notice it unless it's exceedingly obvious, because most people are focused on themselves, not on you. You can also use intense eye contact, which signals trust, knowledge, and intelligence.

As with body language, you want to adjust your choice of words, your breadth and depth of vocabulary, and your expressions to suit your audience. If you use their words and their expressions, they will feel that you intimately understand them.

Their reaction to you will be, "I don't know what it is, but there's something about this person that I really like." And the fact is that, all things being equal, people give preference to people they like. All things not being quite so equal, people still give preference to those they like.

Rational or not, the degree of the general counsel's liking is often a deciding factor when competing in an RFP process. And their liking is often decided by first impressions.

Olivia Fox Cabane is the executive director of Spitfire Communications, a training and consulting firm based in New York. She can be reached at olivia@spitfireteam.com.