

# How to Make a Killer First Impression

By Deborah Johnson

You've probably heard the saying, "You only have one chance at a first impression." First impressions are important. On the surface we look at posture, eye contact, clothing, hair and more. They give us clues that we use to gauge a person: friend or foe, smart or not, rich or poor, the same as us or different.

## ANCIENT DNA

First impressions go well beyond the surface. Our ancient DNA actually sets us up to automatically read other people and our surroundings at a much deeper level. Instantly, this ability to make hundreds of microdecisions – to sense threats or opportunities – is what allowed the human race to survive. It kept us from dangerous foes. It allowed us to know if we were safe.

Deborah has consulted on a variety of cases, including business disputes, contracts, SEC fraud, mortgage fraud, mail fraud, civic rights, workers' compensation, medical malpractice, personal injury, employment, rape, sexual assault, manslaughter and divorce. One recent client won a multimillion-dollar divorce settlement and another won a \$5.3 million award in a civil rights case. She is a six-time Emmy Award-winning writer and producer. She has a master's degree in cognitive psychology and television production from the University of Washington. Her one-on-one approach teaches skills to help witnesses and professionals become confident communicators in the courtroom, boardroom or in front of the media.



Millennia later it's still the same. Each of us is constantly making these unconscious decisions about the people around us. Others are doing the same to us.

So, what does that mean? First, it means that what we discern from these first impressions has a profound effect on how we interact with people. It sets the stage for every conversation. Second, once you know this, you can actually impact what people think about you in those first few seconds: whether they trust you, believe you, value what you say and ultimately how effective you are at your job or in your relationships.

Here are what I consider to be three of the biggest ways to make a killer first impression.

## THE RULE OF 93

Often touted research from UCLA suggests that 93 percent of communication is nonverbal. Yes, 93 percent. The research breaks it down to this: 55 percent of the meaning of communication is what others see (body language). Next, 38 percent is what they hear (tone of voice). Only 7 percent is the actual meaning of the words that are spoken.

That 93 percent nonverbal is our primordial DNA busy at work. We are constantly sending out nonverbal signals that people pick up on. Nonverbal is actually the yardstick against which your words and intentions are measured.

How you enter a room or how you show up for an important conversa-

tion has a powerful impact. Have you ever been late for a meeting? If you're like me, it drives me crazy. So, be thoughtful. If you're on autopilot your nonverbal is going to send a very loud "I'm late" into the room in front of you. Before you ever say a word, you've inadvertently forced everyone to deal with your "I'm late" before your true intentions can be accomplished.

When I'm working with witnesses, I spend time getting them *anchored*, that is, helping them feel confident about their own ability to handle deposition or testimony. If they are relaxed and confident, their nonverbal and verbal are in sync and it's much easier for the jury to believe them.

## 43 MUSCLES

Let's zero in on your most important nonverbal – your face. It goes back to that primordial DNA. People instinctively watch your face, your eyes, your cheeks and your smile to see what you're *really* saying. There are 43 muscles that control your facial expressions and there is no way you can learn how to control them. But changing how you feel and what you're thinking will automatically impact those muscles and what you project to people.

## THE HOW, NOT THE WHAT

When it comes to your voice, once again it's not so much *what* you say, as it is *how* you say it. Your voice is a strong indicator to people about what you are communicating. It includes a variety of voice qualities like pitch,



tempo, intensity and volume. Along with things like clearing your throat, using ums or ahs, crying or laughing.

If someone is nervous or scared, their voice will go up, they may speak a lot faster, stumble or use a lot of ums. If someone is crying but says, “I’m fine,” it’s a dead giveaway. Our DNA always tells us to go with the nonverbal.

Research says that deeper voices are perceived as being more powerful, especially in women. For a killer first impression, slow down, think before you speak, relax and drop your voice down a little.

## VERRIDE AUTOPILOT

The good news is that it’s not hard to override autopilot. Once you’re consciously in control of your voice and your body language, you are in control

of how others perceive you. Remember, your words are being measured against your nonverbal. Before you launch into any important conversation (even on the phone), take 10 seconds and get centered. Take two deep breaths. Stand tall, shoulders back, head up and remain calm.

You’ll notice that your body language will relax and shift and your mind will quiet down. Your voice will drop down and your tempo will slow down a little. This way, you will exude confidence and set a more successful foundation for every conversation.



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