Arizona Paralegal Association

**The Power of First Impressions**

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 clothing, hair style, jewelry, posture, eye contact. They give us clues that we each use to gauge a person: rich or poor, stylish or not, flamboyant or conservative, the same as us or different.

However, first impressions go well beyond whether people like your clothing or hairstyle. Our 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 micro-decisions – to sense threats or opportunities – is what allowed the human race to survive. It kept us from being eaten by a saber-toothed cat. It allowed us to tell if a stranger was friend or foe.

Millennia later it‘s still the same. Each of us is constantly making these unconscious decisions about the people around us. And they’re doing the same to us.

So, what does that mean? First, it means that what we learn from these first impressions has a profound effect on how we interact with people, e.g., approach or avoid. 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 improve other people’s first impression of you.

**The Rule of 93**

There’s interesting research from UCLA that suggests that 93% of communication is non-verbal. Yes, 93%. It breaks it down to this: 55% of the meaning of a message is body language and 38% is from tone of voice. Only 7% is the actual meaning of the words that are spoken.

That 93% is our primordial DNA busy at work. We are constantly sending out non-verbal signals that people pick up on. Have you ever walked into someone’s office and knew immediately that something was wrong? Ever met someone that just felt “creepy?” Those are non-verbal messages you picked up.

If you want to make a great first impression, be very conscious of what you’re sending out: good mood or bad, attentive or distracted, confident or insecure, cooperative or difficult, smart or vapid, etc. It’s totally within your control.

TIP:Take a minute and actually write down how you want to be perceived. Don’t allow others’ first impression of you to be a default to whatever mood you’re in.

**53 Muscles**

Over the years, I’ve observed a powerful characteristic of successful people. Confidence. 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 confident, it’s much easier for the jury to believe them.

It goes back to that primordial DNA-thing. People instinctively watch your face, your eyes, your cheeks, your smile, to see what you’re really saying. There are 53 muscles that control your facial expressions and there is no way in the world you can learn how to control them. But changing how you feel will automatically impact those muscles and what you project to people.

TIP:Before you launch into any important conversation (even on the phone) take 5 seconds and get centered. Breathe. Focus on your abilities talents, skill, experience and expertise. Exude quiet confidence.

**Window Dressing**

No discussion of first impressions would be complete without a few words about appearance. What you look like, does in fact, affect people’s judgment of you. At first glance, you want people to know that you are a confident, educated, personable professional

TIP: Check your appearance. You can look amazing – and appropriate – for your position, your company, your unique taste and your body type.

**Final Word**

You are in control of how people perceive you. Leverage this to make stunning first impressions on everyone you meet. Then watch how it changes your interactions.

**Deborah Johnson** is a six-time EMMY Award-winning writer and producer who worked at #1 TV stations around the country. Today she works with attorneys in tough, high-risk cases to develop key themes, case presentations that are emotionally and visually impactful on the jury, and prepare witnesses for deposition or trial.