

Movies versus Real-life

By David B. Burns
December 2010

A classic theme in romantic Hollywood movies has the male and female leads unable to stand each at the beginning, but growing closer until the final scene shows them kissing while the screen fades to black. This works well for the movies, but seldom happens in real-life. First impressions are powerful, generally accurate, and lasting. That is why making a good first impression is important for success.

In your personal life, if you finish a 'first date' with a poor impression of the other person, you are unlikely to make a second one. In the business world, if you give a potential client a poor impression during your first meeting, you are unlikely to get a second chance.

In a classic study by David A. Kenny at the University of Connecticut, first impressions of strangers were compared with personality ratings from people who knew the subjects well. Nearly seven out of ten ratings by strangers were the same as those from friends and family members of the subjects. Even more interesting was the fact that the 'raters' did not speak or interact with the 'strangers' in any way. They simply observed.

And you don't have long to make that first impression. Research on the subject indicates that an initial impression is formed in the first seven seconds. Within 60 seconds, long lasting opinions are created about everything from education level to personal integrity. These initial impressions are very difficult to dislodge. To make the most of any first meeting, the best strategy is to prepare.

First, do your homework. Learn all you can about the individuals and companies with whom you meet. Gather information from news articles, acquaintances, and other clients. And don't forget the web. Plenty of information is available from where you are probably sitting right now.

Be certain you know everything you can about what you are proposing. If you want to persuade people, whether to buy your product or change their behavior, they must see you as the expert. Know what challenges you are likely to face, and prepare some answers ahead of time. You may not use the exact words, but you will at least have a 'vocabulary' from which to draw.

Second, learn the unspoken language: facial expression, eye contact, appropriate dress, and personal space. What you learned by default growing up might not cut it in the professional world. So don't stop at simply learning. Practice the new behaviors you learned until they become part of you and you demonstrate them without thinking – until they become habits.

Finally, take a few last moments to be “ready.” Experts in any field pause momentarily before beginning. A baseball pitcher doesn't just step on the mound and quickly throw the pitch. He pauses a few seconds to prepare before acting. An orchestra conductor doesn't just step up on the platform and start conducting. She takes a few moments to make sure everyone is prepared before playing. Do the same yourself.

Get in the habit of giving yourself a few final moments of private preparation before entering your arena. Before meeting with a prospect, do a 30 second head-to-toe scan to check your appearance, and then take another 30 seconds to check our mental state, facial expression, and posture.

Use these three guidelines to improve the first impressions you create, and you will build a strong foundation for successful professional relationships.

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