

Projecting a Professional Image in the Workplace

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What makes someone project a confident, professional image? Is it our work experience, the degrees after our name, the appearance of our workplace, how we dress or our own internal feeling of self-confidence? What makes our sense of professionalism falter? Whether working in the corporate setting, community-based non-profit organizations or home-based businesses, we all want to project a professional image. Professional image can be measured by the three "Vs": visual, verbal and vocal — how we look, what we say and how we sound.

It is written that, "Success is not so much what you are, but rather what you appear to be. Appearance is reality." The different cultures of various workplaces often dictate the style of dress. Some dress only in a "corporate suit," others have Casual Fridays, khakis and a polo may be appropriate in another setting and jeans are allowed someplace else. Is appearance limited to how we dress? Does a casual style of dress compromise our professionalism? What should we consider when attempting to make a positive and powerful professional image?

It is critical that each and every business professional attempt to put forth the image of a successful individual. Our need to focus our attention on clothing is obvious; we've heard of dressing for success, but what other visual signals are we communicating? Visual messages are not just limited to the physical surroundings of our workplace or the clothing we wear. We cannot discount how our image is projected through our body language and our use of non-verbal cues. What does a handshake communicate? The firm and solid handshake exudes confidence, the limp one signals weakness and the knuckle-breaking one can be overwhelming or compensating for insecurity. What about eye contact? If you cannot look a client in the eye,

what are you communicating?

An image of power and confidence can also be conveyed through excellent posture. The dejected look of an individual who slouches, is round-shouldered, does not sit up straight in his/her chair at a meeting or places his feet on the table, cannot send out the same powerful signals as one who takes up space at the conference room table, sits erect and leans towards his listeners. Visual signals send powerful information to the observer and often communicate more than the words or the sound of the voice.

We are often measured by the words we say. First, and foremost, we should attend to correct grammar. We should also avoid weak and tentative words such as "I think," "I hope," "maybe" or "You may not agree but ...". Powerful words and phrases project confidence. "I know" or "I will" remove doubt and establish an image of power.

Word fillers, such as "OK," "uh," "um" or "like" diminish the strength and add unnecessary "noise" to the intended message. "Okay, like I went to the, uh, meeting, like at 4 o'clock but, uh, it didn't start 'til, you know, 4:15," is substantially weaker than, "I went to the meeting at 4 o'clock and it didn't start until 4:15." These word fillers often become prominent and disguise the actual message.

How do we clean up our messages? We must think before we talk and become comfortable with pauses and silence. Pauses alert the listener to pay attention and listen to what will be said next.

In addition to the visual and verbal elements of communication, the vocal feature has potential to have a major impact. How we sound, the tone of our voice, can create a range of impressions. The breathy female voice may not be taken seriously, the powerful, harsh voice may be intimidating, the whiney, nasal voice can be irritating and the individual who speaks with "uptalk" or rising intonation relates an air of uncertainty. "My name is Susan Smith," said with the pitch rising sounds more like a question, than

a statement. That introduction alone sets the stage for weakness rather than strength. Monotone speech shows absence of emotion, while excessive pitch changes sounds "perky" and annoying. What image do you project when you answer the telephone? With the absence of the visual information of facial expressions, gestures and body language, the listener can only rely on your choice of words and the quality of your speaking voice.

Professionalism is a goal for every business person. With today's technology and the ability to conduct business globally, we are not always able to have the face-to-face contact. In fact, many business transactions will occur without ever having met the client or customer. Wherever you work, remember you have the ability to refine these visual, verbal and vocal elements to convey an image of power, competence, clarity and success.

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