Communicating A Winning Image...

... of yourself! Doing a presentation? One of the first things you have to sell is your image. Sharlyn Stafford gives pointers on how to change or improve your image.

Companies spend millions establishing a good image for their products designing logos, corporate colours, offices, brochures, advertising campaigns and uniforms. Companies realise that the **packaging on the outside is as important as the product inside.**

You must also package yourself. Let's say you have just purchased a new pair of high quality Reebok shoes and instead of putting them in the bright red, white and blue shoe box, the sales person puts them in the little red plastic bag, the type which is used to hold your *mee goreng* for lunch. Somehow, the shoes don't seem so attractive anymore, even though they are the same pair.

When companies hire workers, they choose people that have a personal image that will also fit the corporate image. If you have aspirations to climb the corporate ladder, there must be a strong link between the image you project as a professional and the image of the company you represent.

We communicate this image through verbal and non-verbal cues. US studies shown it takes less than 10 seconds to form an opinion of someone new, at the first meeting. Fifty-five percent of this opinion is based on the appearance and body language; 38% is attributed to tone of voice and only 7% to what is being said.

A very important point: First impressions really count. The phrase "You never get a second chance to make a first impression" should not be taken lightly. The easiest aspect to first work on is the visual one to change or improve your image. Thus, dress and grooming should be your top priority, more so than body language.

Dressing

Status is linked to position and no matter what is your status level, there are some basic rules to business dress that are appropriate for men and women. This is not about dressing up or dressing down, but dressing appropriately. Consider your job, your role and who do you need to influence?

There are three common mistakes women make when dressing for business:

1. **Dressing inappropriately.** Women often get confused between dressing business-like and dressing too casually. The other occasion is when they come to work at 9.00am dressed like they are ready to go to a party.
2. **Dressing too sexy.** There is a fine line between being feminine and being sexy. It's okay to be the former but not to be sexy or you won't be taken seriously.
3. **Avoid dressing to look like men.** You are women in business, so dress and act like women.

The three common mistakes men make:

1. **Out of date.** Men often wear suits, ties, and styles that are out of date, and hence do not look like a professional man of the 90's.
2. **Belt and shoes not matching.** They should be of the same colour. No black belts with brown shoes or vice versa, please!
3. **Mixing informal and formal dress styles.** For example: an informal short sleeve shirt with the formality of a tie.

Invest in classics. They are long lasting and in the long term, they give you a much better return on your investment. Whatever your choice or combination of clothes, make sure they fit well, look professional and up-to-date.

Think of the money spent on a good business wardrobe as an investment in blue chip stocks - low risk and always a good return on your investment.

Body Language

Body language is another language we use to communicate with others. Sometimes, it can be confusing when people who are listening to us, see two languages that don't connect. Each one telling a different story.

So it is important to have your words and actions working together. You can shut off your verbal output, but you cannot shut off your non-verbal output. The way you use your body and face influences your total image. Your posture, eye contact, facial expressions and gestures all constitute body language.

- **Stand tall** (as if a string is pulling you from the top of your head). Walk tall, look tall and walk with a purpose. This portrays an image of "I mean business." Sit upright and alert, lean forward, show you are interested. Avoid leaning against counters.
- **Gesture with purpose** and open palms facing upwards. Don't point your fingers (it can be considered hostile). Tilt your head to the side occasionally and nod your head in acknowledgment. Let people know that you are listening and that you are interested.
- **Smile.** It's the best facial expression there is. Try it. It works because it is almost impossible for someone not to return one. And smile when appropriate and as much as possible. It tells people you are friendly and approachable.
- **Direct eye contact** says "I'm listening." And try not to stare people down though, this can be seen as hostile.

Also remember, you can't fake all your body language all of the time. However, you can try and become more aware of how you communicate non-verbally. If you're listening to people, they always give you the feedback.

Vocal

Your voice is a powerful communicator and another part that makes up your overall image. When people first meet you, they seek confirmation of these impressions through what they hear.

The sound of your voice should reinforce the impact of your appearance and the message that you are communicating. Even if you say the right thing but with a non-enthusiastic tone, your message is unlikely to have the desired impact.

Looking good is also a career asset, no matter what your career is. Representing a neatly turned out "I care" look is an asset. It says, "This is how I feel about myself and my work." It develops employee and employer confidence.

Looking good is also an attitude and it is your attitude, rather than your aptitude which determines your altitude.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR...

Sharlyn is a dynamic and successful consultant providing both consultancy and training in personal and corporate image, grooming and business etiquette. She is a Director of Stafford and Chan Training Pte Ltd.

SELLING YOURSELF FIRST...

To help you project that professional image you want, you can also get Sharlyn's double cassette **"Selling Yourself First."** *The cassette can be a good investment for your future and is available at $19.95 (or $17.95 for two or more). Enquiries, tel: 3348332, fax: 3371608.*