

Practice Good Nonverbal Communication

It's about demonstrating confidence: standing straight, making eye contact and connecting with a firm handshake. That first nonverbal impression can be a great beginning -- or quick ending -- to your interview.

Whether you're interacting with a customer, your boss or a colleague in another company, a confident, well-executed handshake is one of the best business skills you can cultivate to ensure that each new encounter gets off on the right foot -- and that you are representing yourself and your company positively.

Anatomy of a Perfect Handshake

A handshake is "an opportunity to establish rapport and positive chemistry," suggests Dana May Casperson in *Power Etiquette: What You Don't Know Can Kill Your Career*. "An immediate bond develops from the touch of a hand that sets the tone for conversation and future business association."

While a handshake might seem a fairly simple and straightforward gesture, there are nuances involved with this highly psychological social ritual. These expert tips will help you ensure that your handshake is communicating what you want it to:

- **Get the Timing Right:** Shake hands whenever you are introduced to someone, whenever you introduce yourself to someone, and whenever you say goodbye, says Casperson.
- **Speak Up:** Say something when you shake hands, suggests Casperson. You can acknowledge the person's name and say, "It's very nice to meet you, Mr. Jones" or "Good to see you again."
- **Get a Grip:** Your grip speaks volumes, say Peter and Peggy Post in *The Etiquette Advantage in Business: Personal Skills for Professional Success*. A limp one suggests hesitance or mousiness, while a bone cruncher can seem overly enthusiastic or domineering. A medium-firm grip conveys confidence and authority.
- **Dry Your Palms:** Nobody likes clammy hands, says Jennifer Star, copresident of The Jennifer Group, a New York City-based recruiting firm specializing in administrative support staff. Sweaty palms communicate nervousness, which can subconsciously make people feel like you've got something to hide. Star suggests carrying Kleenex or liquid baby powder to rub on your palms before shaking hands.
- **Shake Palm to Palm:** Make sure you shake palm to palm, and keep your hand perpendicular to the ground. An upturned palm may subconsciously signal submissiveness -- a downward palm, dominance, say the Posts. And while grasping the top of the person's hand with your other hand while shaking can often be a signal of warmth and affection, the Posts caution that this forward of a greeting might seem presumptuous or insincere when used in a first meeting.
- **Mind Your Audience:** Be observant, and follow the cues of those around you, says Casperson. Respond with pressure that meets the pressure you receive. Don't try to overpower the other person if their grasp is more timid. And be aware that different social boundaries prevail in different cultures. In North America and Europe, a firm handshake is an appropriate form of greeting, the Posts say. In Asia and the Middle East, where handshaking is still relatively new, the grip is gentler; a too-hearty grip could be interpreted as aggressive.
- **Know When to Let Go:** The ideal handshake lasts approximately three seconds. The hands can be gently pumped once or twice, and then it's time to pull back your hand, even if you are still conversing.

Nonverbal Messages:

It begins even before you say your first word in an interview. As the interviewer walks toward you to shake hands, an opinion is already being formed. And as you sit waiting to spew out your answers to questions you've prepared for, you are already being judged by your appearance, posture, smile or your nervous look.

Look back at speakers or teachers you've listened to. Which ones stand out as memorable? The ones who were more animated and entertaining, or the ones who just gave out information? This is not to say you have to entertain the interviewer -- no jokes required -- but it does mean the conversation should be animated and interactive. If you say you are excited about the prospect of working for this company but don't show any enthusiasm, your message will probably fall flat. So smile, gesture once in a while, show some energy and breathe life into the interview experience.

And don't underestimate the value of a smile. In addition to the enthusiasm it expresses to the interviewer, smiling often makes you feel better about yourself.

- **The Handshake:** It's your first encounter with the interviewer. She holds out her hand and receives a limp, damp hand in return -- not a very good beginning. Your handshake should be firm -- not bone-crushing -- and your hand should be dry and warm. Try running cold water on your hands when you first arrive at the interview site. Run warm water if your hands tend to be cold. The insides of your wrists are especially sensitive to temperature control.
- **Your Posture:** Stand and sit erect. We're not talking ramrod posture, but show some energy and enthusiasm. A slouching posture looks tired and uncaring. Check yourself out in a mirror or on videotape.
- **Eye Contact:** Look the interviewer in the eye. You don't want to stare at her like you're trying to look into her soul, but be sure to make sure your eyes meet frequently. Avoid constantly looking around the room while you are talking, because that can convey nervousness or a lack of confidence with what is being discussed.
- **Your Hands:** Gesturing or talking with your hands is very natural, but keep it in moderation. Getting carried away with hand gestures can be distracting. Also, avoid touching your mouth while talking. Watch yourself in a mirror while talking on the phone. Chances are you are probably using some of the same gestures in an interview.
- **Don't Fidget:** There is nothing worse than people playing with their hair, clicking pen tops, tapping feet or unconsciously touching parts of the body.

Preparing what you have to say is important, but practicing how you will say it is imperative. The nonverbal message can speak louder than the verbal message you're sending.

Dress for the Job or Company

Today's casual dress codes do not give you permission to dress as "they" do when you interview. It is important to know what to wear to an interview and to be well-groomed. Whether you wear a suit or something less formal depends on the company culture and the position you are seeking. If possible, call to find out about the company dress code before the interview.

You have a job interview tomorrow. You've learned everything about the company, you're prepared for any questions they ask, and you even arrived a few minutes early. You couldn't be more ready.

But when you stop in the restroom for a last look in the mirror, your mind starts racing: "Am I dressed the way I should be for this interview?"

"In an interview situation, you're marketing yourself as a product, and so you want and need to have the best image possible," says Amy Glass, a trainer and coach at Brody Communications Ltd. of Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, and an expert on presentation skills, business etiquette, professional presence and interpersonal communication.

Presenting a professional image is more about doing your homework than spending money. So as you prepare for your interview, keep these wardrobe tips in mind.

It's OK to Ask What to Wear

In many traditional industries, like finance or accounting, business professional dress will be appropriate: A conservative suit, shirt and tie if you're a man, or a conservative suit if you're a woman, with -- perhaps -- personality shown through your shirt or jewelry, Glass says. In other industries such as advertising, public relations, graphic design and information technology, what to wear might be less clear. If that's the case, Glass says, ask about the company's general dress policies when you're first contacted about an interview.

"You can say to the person you speak with, 'I want to make sure I understand your company culture and dress appropriately,'" Glass notes. "It's not a bad thing at all. In fact, it shows respect."

If in doubt, err on the conservative side. "I've been overdressed at times, and that can be uncomfortable," Glass says. "But that's much better than being underdressed."

Shop Smart

You don't have to buy several suits for different interviews at the same company. In many instances, you can get by with one suit combined with what Glass calls a "capsule dressing" strategy -- varying what you wear with the suit each time.

"If I'm a young woman and I invest in a nice black pantsuit, I could use that one suit for interviews, but change the shirt, jewelry or scarf each time," says Glass.

Don't Neglect Accessories

If you have leather shoes, Glass says, make sure they're shined. If you have suede shoes, make sure they're brushed. And if your shoes are five years old, have the soles redone at a shoemaker. If you have a leather briefcase and it's still in good shape, now's the time to use it. If you don't, a nice portfolio binder will do just fine.

Will all the effort and expense you put into your professional image for your interview make any difference? Absolutely, Glass says. In fact, it's essential.

"Your image matters because it shows your attentiveness to detail and gives recruiters an idea of how you'll represent their company to clients, both internally and externally," Glass concludes. "The visual message you send makes a big difference in how you're perceived and, ultimately, whether or not you get the job."

Listen

From the very beginning of the interview, your interviewer is giving you information, either directly or indirectly. If you are not hearing it, you are missing a major opportunity. Good communication skills include listening and letting the person know you heard what was said. ObservA crazy thing about communication in American society is the strange power of the listener. A song isn't good unless the listener says it is good; audiences determine music's success. However, it is equally true that we aren't serious listeners until we have educated our ears. If we don't critically train our listening tastes, we could be a mindless consumer of whatever the music industry pushes our way with big ad budgets and slick promotions.

As in music, good listening counts in business. Donald Carstensen, vice president for educational services at ACT, surveyed a group of business leaders about the skills businesses are looking for in new hires. Seventy-three percent rated listening an "extremely important" skill. When Carstensen asked business leaders the percentage of high school grads with good listening skills, the result was only 19 percent.

Other studies over the past few decades indicate that business leaders consistently rank listening among the top five skills they expect employees to have. Naturally, listening is critical in the business environment where a mistake in understanding can cost thousands or millions of dollars, or listening to a customer or employee can make a product better and increase the bottom line.

Good and Poor Listeners

What are the characteristics of good and poor listeners? A study conducted of 900 college and military students ages 17 to 70 showed the following traits of good and poor listeners (in order of importance).

A good listener:

- Uses eye contact appropriately.
- Is attentive and alert to a speaker's verbal and nonverbal behavior.
- Is patient and doesn't interrupt (waits for the speaker to finish).
- Is responsive, using verbal and nonverbal expressions.
- Asks questions in a nonthreatening tone.
- Paraphrases, restates or summarizes what the speaker says.
- Provides constructive (verbal or nonverbal) feedback.
- Is empathic (works to understand the speaker).
- Shows interest in the speaker as a person.
- Demonstrates a caring attitude and is willing to listen.
- Doesn't criticize, is nonjudgmental.
- Is open-minded.

A poor listener:

- Interrupts the speaker (is impatient).
- Doesn't give eye contact (eyes wander).
- Is distracted (fidgeting) and does not pay attention to the speaker.
- Is not interested in the speaker (doesn't care, daydreaming).
- Gives the speaker little or no (verbal or nonverbal) feedback.
- Changes the subject.
- Is judgmental.
- Is closed-minded.
- Talks too much.
- Is self-preoccupied.
- Gives unwanted advice.
- Too busy to listen.

Similar studies done over the last two decades by Fortune 500 trainers and business consultants have found similar results.

Be Active

On the way up the career ladder, your listening skills should improve. Hourly employees may spend 30 percent of their time listening, while managers often spend 60 percent, and executives 75 percent or more. Does effective listening lead to promotion, or do higher-ups learn to listen better because they must? It is probably a combination. Essentially, to be more successful, you must be a better listener. Better listening is also active listening.

To be an active listener, you must begin with awareness. When do others get angry with you for poor communication? When do you have problems communicating? How were you listening at these times? It takes guts, but ask others what you could do to become a better listener. Others see our faults much better than we do. Learn about effective listening: Read books, visit <http://www.listen.org/> for tips, or take a workshop or class on effective listening. Then be sure to practice what you learn.

Power Listening

To be a successful listener, you must also believe that listening is power. Because our society places so much emphasis on speaking as the way to win friends and influence people, good listeners can quietly have a powerful and subversive impact. You should also remember that speakers have little power without listeners. Speakers share their wisdom and try to persuade, but listeners make meaning of what is heard -- they make the ultimate decision to act on what they hear.

Don't Talk Too Much

Telling the interviewer more than he needs to know could be a fatal mistake. When you have not prepared ahead of time, you may ramble when answering interview questions, sometimes talking yourself right out of the job. Prepare for the interview by reading through the job posting, matching your skills with the position's requirements and relating only that information.

Don't Be Too Familiar

The interview is a professional meeting to talk business. This is not about making a new friend. Your level of familiarity should mimic the interviewer's demeanor. It is important to bring energy and enthusiasm to the interview and to ask questions, but do not overstep your place as a candidate looking for a job.

Use Appropriate Language

It's a given that you should use professional language during the interview. Be aware of any inappropriate slang words or references to age, race, religion, politics or sexual orientation -- these topics could send you out the door very quickly.

Don't Be Cocky

Attitude plays a key role in your interview success. There is a fine balance between confidence, professionalism and modesty. Even if you're putting on a performance to demonstrate your ability, overconfidence is as bad, if not worse, as being too reserved.

Take Care to Answer the Questions

When interviewers ask for an example of a time when you did something, they are asking behavioral interview questions, which are designed to elicit a sample of your past behavior. If you fail to relate a specific example, you not only don't answer the question, but you also miss an opportunity to prove your ability and talk about your skills.

Ask Questions

When asked if they have any questions, most candidates answer, "No." Wrong answer. Part of knowing how to interview is being ready to ask questions that demonstrate an interest in what goes on in the company. Asking questions also gives you the opportunity to find out if this is the right place for you. The best questions come from listening to what you're asked during the interview and asking for additional information.

In many situations, the questions you ask in an interview can be more revealing than the answers you give. Recruiters are looking for candidates who ask insightful questions throughout the recruitment process; they see candidates' questions for employers as clues about their analytical skills.

"[It's] always really disappointing to any interviewer when you get to the end of an interview and you ask, 'Do you have any questions I can answer for you?' and they say, 'Nope, I think you answered them all,' and that's the end of it," says Kent Kirch, global director of recruiting at professional services firm Deloitte. "It's just really frustrating...I think as a candidate, part of the homework piece is having a really tough question for an interview. For me, I just love it when someone asks a really difficult question -- something that takes some guts to ask."

Questions are also a sign of enthusiasm, something most recruiters and hiring managers desperately want to see. "The way to show interest is by asking follow-up questions, really taking interest in what they're doing and showing that you've done some research as well," says Austin Cooke, director of global recruitment at Sapient, a technology consulting company.

The Best Types of Questions

There's no standard set of good questions to ask employers. "The questions should be thoughtful, not canned, because any good recruiter is going to know somebody told you to ask that question, and that's a turnoff," says Jennifer Scott, head of recruitment for Petro, the nation's largest heating oil service and delivery company. "I hate it when people have a list of generic questions."

Recruiters suggest asking questions specific to the company and industry you're exploring. The best candidates "ask really well-thought-out questions that show that you know the [interviewer's] business," says Kirch. "You know their company to some extent, and you've thought about your question. It all goes back to preparation, and it tells the interviewer you thought about this interview before you walked in the door."

Many recruiters also like to see someone latch onto a point from the interview and delve into it more deeply. "Show me you can think on your feet," says Scott.

Four Starter Questions

While you should always customize your questions for the particular job and situation, here are four to get you started.

1. Can you tell me about the culture here?

Company culture can be a bit difficult to get a handle on until you walk through the door and experience it yourself. The interview is a great time to ask questions that reveal the company's personality.

2. Would you mind telling me about how your career got you to this point?

This question is good on two levels: It gives you a chance to learn a bit about potential coworkers or potential bosses, and it's also a nice ego rub for the interviewer. "People love to talk about themselves, so if you can get the interviewer talking about himself, you're one step up," explains Cooke.

3. Can you tell me about your management style?

If you're interviewing with the person who may be your boss, it's important to understand how he'll manage you and the people around you.

The interviewer's answer to this question should reveal a few things. It will give you a sense of some of the challenges you'll face if you end up joining the team, as well as tell you how your potential coworkers handle sticky questions. It may also provide some insight about how forthright they are.

4. What's your biggest source of job satisfaction?

This question can help you understand both what makes your potential workmates tick and what they think the company's strengths are.

Don't Appear Desperate

When you interview with the "please, please hire me" approach, you appear desperate and less confident. Reflect the three Cs during the interview: cool, calm and confidence. You know you can do the job; make sure the interviewer believes you can, too.

<http://career-advice.monster.com/resumes-cover-letters/careers.aspx>