

# The First Way You Communicate With an Audience

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You communicate with your audience before you even open your mouth to present your ideas. By your dress and appearance, your audience makes deductions about your competence and confidence. If they like what they see, they are immediately more receptive to your ideas. If they don't, windows start to close. The National Retailers Association says if you make a bad first appearance, it takes seven more perfect encounters to erase that bad first impression. The following pointers about dress and appearance will insure that you put your best foot forward.

1. **Be professional.** While that may seem like a “no brainer,” it is a lot more challenging to dress professionally in today's casual work environment. Things were a lot simpler when all one had to do was put on a business suit and worry about choosing a tie or shoes. Regardless of the environment, it is always appropriate for a man to wear a collared shirt and dress pants. Typically, it is inappropriate to wear a tee shirt or shoes without socks. For women, a good question to ask is whether the outfit is more appropriate for week-end wear, resort wear or after hours. Women should also be conscious of nails (Are they too long or bright), hair styles (Is hairstyle too big or too long?) jewelry (Is it distracting?), and clothing (Is it too faddish?). Jeans, shorts, flip-flops and sandals are not recommended. When in doubt, it is better to error on the conservative side.
2. **Be comfortable.** If you are making an important presentation, the last thing you want to worry about is your attire or breaking in a new pair of shoes. If you have gained or lost weight, it is important that your clothes look like they are the right size for you. If they aren't, people will notice and you will not feel secure. While trendy, cropped blouses, short skirts or skirts with slits up the side are likely to be worrisome.

3. **Understand your goal.** Do you want to blend in or stand out? If you want to blend in because you are part of a team, wear dark, conservative colors. If, on the other hand, the goal is to be distinguished from the competition, wear a bright scarf, an interesting pin or a colorful tie. This does not mean that you should be overly flamboyant. It does mean that there should be something about your attire that will help people to remember you long after you walk out the door.
4. **Be coordinated.** Shirts, ties, shoes, blouses, pants should all be coordinated. A mismatched color combination or an outfit that doesn't quite look complete can cause an audience to have a negative reaction. If you have any doubts about whether the pieces to your outfit work well together, consult an image consultant at your local department store.
5. **Look up-to-date.** A sure turn-off to an audience is for the speaker to look out of the 60's. Make sure your make-up, hair style, glasses, shoes and suits look current. By being up-to-date in your appearance, you suggest that you keep current professionally, as well.
6. **Be well-groomed.** Hair should be clean and neat versus windblown or messy. Shoes should be polished and nails should be filed. Regardless of your financial situation, there is no excuse for poor grooming habits.

Dress and appearance should not be underestimated. It should contribute to the perception you want to establish. It should demonstrate that you care and that you pay attention to details. It speaks volumes to the audience and helps to establish your “presence.” Make sure your first impression is positive.

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