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In an earlier article, I discussed the research indicating it can take as little as a tenth of a second for others to form a first impression about you.

This is critical and potentially troublesome information when meeting with prospects. What if a prospect makes a snap judgment that you are not trustworthy? How can you overcome that obstacle?

Understand the process

The power of an impression made within the first couple of seconds after meeting a person for the first time was demonstrated by a psychology student who collected a series of videotaped job interviews. Her goal was to determine if an observer could predict whether or not the interviewee would be offered a job from watching the first 15 seconds of the tape, which consisted basically of a handshake and an exchange of initial greetings. She found the predictive ability of the observers was strikingly accurate.

The proclivity of people to make snap judgments about complicated issues based upon very little input is known as “thin-slicing methodology.” An example of this would be a prospect making a decision about whether or not to do business with you based on nothing more than simply looking at you.

The role of confirmation bias

One of the problems with making determinations predicated on very little information is that, once the judgment is made, our brain scans for information that confirms our initial impression, and ignores contrary data. This is known as “confirmation bias.” Numerous studies have established that once we make up our mind about a person, it’s very difficult to change it.

How to make a positive first impression

Previously, I discussed the function that clothes can play in first impressions. It seems obvious that if people are going to judge us within the first few seconds of meeting, a significant factor has to be the visual impact we make. The clothes we wear play an important role in how we are initially viewed. My anecdotal experience coaching a number of advisor clients has validated this premise.

Many advisors believe they should emulate the dress of their prospect. In my view, this is a mistake. Instead, dress to confirm the traits your prospect is seeking in an advisor. Those traits likely include, honesty, intelligence, success and (perhaps most significantly) trustworthiness. Unless you are meeting with someone under 30, in which case you should dress one level better than they are dressed, appropriate business attire for men includes a well-tailored suit, solid color white or blue shirt and a conservative tie. Women should wear a well-tailored, skirted suit, preferably from a well-known designer (like Armani). I tell my advisor clients to dress as expensively as they can afford.

There is also data indicating that people who are perceived as open, expressive and somewhat animated make a more positive first impression than people who come across as “difficult to read.” It may be that open, expressive people are perceived as less of a threat because it is easier for others to “read” them.

Finally, the sooner you can share something in common with the person you are meeting for the first time, the more likely they will form a positive impression of you. It’s striking how even trivial similarities (like sharing a similar name or reading books of the same genre) can positively impact the impression you make.
One thing is very clear: Unless you quickly make a positive first impression, the chance of converting a prospect into a client is significantly diminished. Many advisors pay great attention to the substance of the meeting and give little thought to how to make a positive first impression. Based on this research, my recommendation is for you to focus on both equally.

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