

Dressing for Success

How Perceptions Create Reality

Cathy Kozlowicz

I vividly remember my first professional job interview straight out of college. I wore a borrowed tailored pantsuit from my friend, pumps, and a faux silk shirt. I remember looking into the mirror and I felt I was dressed for success.

Yet, I never felt more uncomfortable in my life. If I had worn a black velvet pantsuit, a cotton turtleneck, and comfortable flats, I would have felt more like me. And then maybe the results of the interview would have been different.

I already felt insecure applying for a middle-management job. But I felt even more insecure wearing clothes that made me feel like a kid playing dress up. I was greeted by an older woman, who wore the PERFECT suit. Within seconds, she seemed to regard me as “incompetent.” I could not hold eye contact with her, she rushed through her questions, and she did not really seem to listen to what I said. I acted like I was incompetent, struggled to explain my strengths, and did not sound very articulate.

By the time the interview was over, we both knew I did not have the job. I felt that it was decided as soon as we introduced ourselves. I was dressed in an outfit that made me uncomfortable and that made my already existing insecurity even more powerful.

While we don't like to admit it, people make judgments on what we are wearing. Research shows that it takes seven seconds to make a first impression. Fifty-five percent of that first impression is



based on what you see while only seven percent is based on what you hear (Ramsey 2000). If people develop their first impressions in seven seconds, wouldn't it make sense that clothing heavily contributes to this first impression?

The first impression is all the more powerful because it can start a chain reaction. I remember a history class I took in college. On the first day of class before the professor walked in, I muttered to my friend next to me, “I don't want to take this class.” Then the professor walked in. She looked like she was in her early 30s, had her hair pulled back in a careless ponytail, and wore khakis and a sweater. She looked interesting and approachable. My friend looked at the instructor and said to me, “This does not look so bad.” I agreed.

If the professor's clothing makes her look friendly and relaxed, then students might listen to her with more warmth and attention. They might laugh at her jokes and feel comfortable approaching her with concerns. If this were true, wouldn't

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this affect the professor's behavior? Wouldn't it cause the professor to be even more confident in her connection with the students, which would then cause the students to be even more attentive?

Research shows that once you form an impression of someone, it affects how you interact with that person. Often, a person's behavior will seem to confirm your initial impressions. There is a social psychology concept called the confirmation bias. The confirmation bias means you have a tendency to pay attention to and remember behaviors and characteristics that relate to your initial impressions. For example, if you have a professor who dresses in a friendly and relaxed manner, students will interpret this professor's neutral statements and behavior as being friendly and relaxed. If a professor seems very formal and distant, students will interpret neutral statements as formal and distant. Even if these two professors were saying similar things, they could be interpreted very differently by the students because of

the confirmation bias.

The tailored pantsuit I wore to my first job interview made me feel uncomfortable. Could the interviewer tell that I was not confident? Therefore, did she treat me like a less confident person which caused me to act even less confident than I already felt? That's the trouble with first impressions. It only takes seven seconds to form one, but the chain reaction goes on and on.

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Sources: Alcock, J. E., Carment, D. W., & Sadava, S. W. (2005). *A Textbook of Social Psychology* (6th ed). Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada; Ramsey, L. (2000). *Manners that Sell: Adding the polish that builds profits*. New York: Longfellow Press.

Quick: What's Your First Impression?



Describe your first impression of these two teachers.

How does your judgement affect you? Do you feel more drawn to one of the professors?

Explain how the confirmation bias might play out in each professor's classroom.