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Guest Column

September 2005 - **Using Impression Management to Excel in Your Career**

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What do people think when you walk into a room? Do they think you are the consummate professional or do they wonder how you got a job in the first place? If you don't know, now is the time to find out how making a positive impression can benefit your career.

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Using Impression Management to Excel in Your Career

Social psychologists studying the impact of image have determined that first impressions are based on the following:

- 55% appearance and body language,
- 38% tonality (voice intonation) and
- 7% word choice.

This means that before you even open your mouth, people are forming impressions about you. Once you have made a negative first impression, it is very difficult to overcome that perception you have created in others as they will be strongly, yet perhaps unconsciously, influenced by their initial judgment. It is essential that you prepare yourself for every kind of business situation, whether it's an important client meeting or a typical day at the office. Know the kind of image you want to project and take the necessary steps to ensure you project that image no matter what the occasion.

Why is impression management so important? According to social psychologists, it only takes 30 seconds for someone to form a laundry list of impressions about your character and abilities. In this short amount of time, the person you have just met has already formed an impression about your:

- Educational level
- Career competence and success
- Personality

- Level of sophistication
- Trustworthiness
- Sense of humor
- Social heritage

Appearance is not only an important factor in winning new clients, but also in determining your overall business success. You should always project an image of being a professional who pays attention to details. With this in mind, it is important to invest the time and money necessary to attain the right look. The old adage is true: "If you want to make money, you have to spend money." **Do not skimp on your professional attire.**

Now, what do you need in order to make a change?

- The desire to improve your appearance
- An understanding of body language signals
- A color analysis (if you never had one done before.)
- A body type analysis (to identify the styles that enhance your appearance.)
- A wardrobe plan
- The ability to create "Clothing Capsules"

An important component of appearance, body language is a nonverbal form of communication that encompasses everything from the way you shake hands and where you focus your eyes during a conversation to your facial expressions and how you move your body. When your prospective client introduces him or herself and extends a hand, reach out and clasp their hand, smile warmly, make eye contact and give them a firm handshake; this applies to both men and women. Smile often during your meeting and keep your head up. While talking to them, make good eye contact. Avoid nervous gestures, clicking a pen, or fidgeting with your hair. What you want to convey is confidence, self-assurance and professionalism. And if you don't think that the way you dress affects business decisions, then think again; surveys have shown that 84 out of 100 executives admit that their companies have rejected applicants based solely on how they were dressed.

Here is a list of things to avoid when creating your appearance:

- Wearing the wrong colors for your color type - "dictated by fashion"
- Wearing too small a size (skin tight)
- Inappropriate makeup (too much or NO makeup - both are equally bad)
- Wearing the wrong color panty hose
- Wearing no panty hose
- Wearing panty hose with reinforced toes in open shoes
- Wearing open-toed shoes in business
- Wearing run down or unpolished shoes

- Chipped nail polish, uneven nails or broken nails
- Having cat claws
- Slips that show
- Visible underarm stains
- Visible bra straps
- Wearing black undergarments under white clothes
- Roots showing when hair is colored
- Hair worn without styling
- Lining of dress or shirt hanging below your hemline
- Wearing soiled clothes
- Having lint or dandruff on your shoulder
- Using old and worn handbags

Clothing Capsules are a clever way to extend your wardrobe and do a lot with a little. Once you understand how this works, you'll begin to plan your wardrobe around them and give yourself lots of options without wasting money on impulse items that don't go with anything else you own.

A clothing capsule is a group of 5-12 pieces (jacket, skirt, slacks, etc.) that work in a combination with each other. When I first learned about them, lights went off in my head. I'd been combining certain clothes for years, but then only wore other items just one way. Learning this method ultimately saved me time and money and can do the same for you, too.

While there are no set rules, here are some general guidelines:

- Select 5-9 color coordinated pieces that can be combined
- Solids mix more easily than prints.
- Prints can bridge two completely different solids.
- Classic styles will last forever.
- Simple, untrimmed styles are more versatile and become less dated.
- Make sure each piece is in your most flattering color palette and fits both your shape and your clothing personality.
- Don't waste money on stuff that doesn't fit or make you look good.
- Avoid trendy styles. What's "in" this year will be "out" next year and you'll be out the cash.
- Invest in quality.

I know from experience that some women are really good at mixing and matching while others need a little more help. Arrange your closet for easy access by keeping all the pants together, all the jackets together, all the skirts together, etc., by color, so that you can see at a glance what you have to work with.

Most importantly, don't forget that you are a "product" and your appearance is the packaging that people will look to for clues about how good the product really is. Either you will make a great impression on your client or your competition will. Always remember the "Communication Rule of Twelve": The first twelve words out of your mouth, the first twelve steps you take into a room and the first twelve articles of your clothing. Commit yourself to excellence and it's only a matter of time before you will achieve your professional goals.

Mercedes Alfaro is the President and Founder of First Impression Management, Inc., a national business etiquette training and consulting firm. Ms. Alfaro has helped numerous clients excel in all aspects of their professional presence including IBM, Motorola, Marriott, American Airlines, Kennesaw State University and Office Depot. She can be reached by calling 1-888-324-6243 or visit First Impression Management, Inc., online at www.firstimpressionmanagement.com.

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