

Spring Cleaning Your Professional Image

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When I think of spring, I think of cleaning out and fresh starts. It feels good to wash the windows, organize cabinets, steam clean carpets, and get rid of “stuff” that does nothing more than take up space. It’s a great time to rearrange furniture, update sofa pillows, add fresh plants to rooms, and change up table decorations.



In order to do this effectively, it takes an intentional effort to truly evaluate with a critical eye what might look old, out-dated, or even a bit dingy. Sometimes, we may even need the help of a friend to point out things that we, ourselves, may not notice.

The same holds true for your professional image. You may not be aware that your body language is saying “unapproachable.” Or maybe the tone of your voice gives the impression of incompetence. How about your clothing? Does it say “I’m professional?” Or is it saying, “My work is as sloppy as my look?”

Many professionals sabotage themselves before they even say “Hello.” It only takes about five seconds to make an impression on others. In those initial seconds, you are being sized up. Your body language, facial expressions, gestures, posture, clothing, and hair are evaluated in split seconds. Others are paying more attention to your non-verbal communication than the words coming out of your mouth.

According to Albert Mehrabian, Psychologist at UCLA, your non-verbal communication accounts for 93% of the impression made on others while only 7% is based on spoken words. In fact, 38% is based on tone of voice and 55% is based on body language. That’s powerful stuff.

Maybe it's time to spruce up your image. Change a few habits. Make a few tweaks. It's absolutely amazing what a few simple changes can make to your professional images. However, sometimes, just like our own house, it's very difficult to recognize those things that are getting in the way of success without outside help or intentional review.

Here's a few ways to check out the image you project:

- Enlist the help of a close friend or family member who cares about you. Ask specific questions about your appearance. What do they see? What do they like? What do they believe you should change? Maybe it's your hair, shoes, glasses, posture.
- Video yourself giving a speech about your favorite vacation. Observe your body language and tone of voice. Are you making any distracting gestures or using filler words such as "ummm," "like," or "so?"
- Hire a consultant to work with you. Sometimes it's the outside, unbiased professional that is able to offer the constructive criticism needed to build a world-class image.

In today's fast-paced, social media world, human contact is becoming less frequent. Social skills and the professional qualities that shout competence, confidence, and credibility are slipping away.

Consider the following ten tips to begin cleaning up your image:

1. Speak with a strong clear voice.
2. Get rid of junk or fillers words. There's nothing wrong with pauses during a conversation or speech. In fact, pauses give the impression of thoughtfulness. Many people fill pauses with annoying and distracting words.
3. Stand and sit straight. Did you know slouching not only adds an extra ten pounds and ten years but it gives the impression of lazy and incompetence?
4. Use appropriate body language. Smile more. Make eye contact when speaking with others. Use a firm grip when shaking hands – no bone crushers or dead fish shakes. Don't cross your arms across your chest. This give the impression that you are closed to the thoughts being expressed.
5. Dress for the job you want. Observe how your boss dresses and copy. Quality is better than quantity. Buy the best you can afford. Keep shoes polished and clothing pressed. If your clothing says you don't care, then you can be sure others won't care either.

6. Remember personal hygiene is critical. Everything about you speaks — hair, nails, odors, bad breath. Are you wearing too much fragrance? Are your nails too long? Bright blue? What image are you projecting?
7. Arrive to appointments on time. Show respect to others by valuing their time even if you are the boss.
8. Don't interrupt others. Wait for pauses in the conversation to share your thoughts or to ask questions.
9. Use good listening skills. Lean in to show an interest. Ask questions. Restate an unclear comment or question for clarity.
10. Exude confidence. Do you have "presence" when you walk into a room? Project poise, self-assurance, and ease.

All of these subtle and not-so-subtle non-verbals are constantly being interpreted by others – positively or negatively. Make it your plan this spring to re-evaluate the image you project and discover the power of a professional image.

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