

First Impressions In Right-of-Way Acquisition

By Carol Ann Valentine, Ph.D.

Acquisition agents, along with the general public, never get a second chance to make a good first impression. Research indicates that it takes only four minutes to form a tentative first impression of another. The more thoughtful and deliberate among us wait up to six minutes!

Agents are not immune from making these quick judgments. Surely landowners, attorneys, engineers, and supervisors are equally susceptible.

The reality of these snap first impressions and the notation that interpreting and creating appropriate first impressions is critical for effective agents provide impetus for this article.

Clearly the acquisition agent is a prime candidate for education in the realm of first impressions. First contacts have long been considered central in the acquisition project. In ideal circumstances there is no second encounter, consensus is reached on the first.

In some cases we can speculate that second calls, third calls, and so on are necessary only because of ineffective first calls. Thus, this article seeks to alert agents to some dimensions of first impressions and, thereby, make those first calls more successful.

First calls are not, however, the only reason for agents attending to first impressions. Subsequent meetings also begin with those critical first four minutes. That is, according to Zunin's research, each time we encounter another person the first few minutes are more important than any other portion of the meeting.

How can agents maximize their effectiveness during the first four minutes? How can agents judge the messages being sent by others during these important first four minutes? What are some actual examples of cases from experience that illustrate how those first four minutes have worked to the eventual advantage or disadvantage of the agent?

Nonverbal Dimensions

Since in many first impression situations we know very little of the other person, nonverbal communication plays a signif-

icant role in impression formation. That is, at this point there has probably been very little, beyond ritualistic, verbal communication. Indeed, the research shows that nonverbal communication is somewhere between 65 and 90 percent of the meaning we get from others. Some of these nonverbal cues that we read during initial encounters are obvious.

Handshakes are one example of an obvious nonverbal cue. What kind of a handshake are we giving and receiving? Most people are positively impressed by a handshake that is firm, but not too firm. The "bone crusher" doesn't generally make a hit nor does the so-called "cold fish." Hold on long enough to establish contact, but not long enough to begin holding hands.

Shake hands freely. It is one of the few socially acceptable ways to quickly establish physical contact and speed the getting acquainted process in our culture. It is also a common form of expression of a willingness to talk. If there is a universal gesture of business, it is the handshake.

One agent tells of a situation in which the handshake became a significant variable. This involved a woman who was overtly insulted by the "gentle" handshake from the male agent. Her response was "If you can't treat me like a business equal, we can't do business!"

This example not only illustrates the importance of handshakes, but also raises a sensitive contemporary issue. In most cases, modern women accept shaking hands as a part of American commerce and are tending to follow the same handshaking norms as men.

To learn how *your* handshake comes across, ask. Ask colleagues, friends, and relations what impressions they get from your handshake. If you get a consistent response this is useful information. Even if you get varying replies, that can be helpful. You might, for example, discover an arthritic colleague, who finds the regular pressure of handshaking painful. This can be useful information and might explain

why some avoid shaking hands or give weak handshakes.

Eye contact provides cues. Most people prefer direct eye contact, but don't like to be stared at. A lack of eye contact or wandering eye contact is generally interpreted as a lack of interest.

One agent dramatically learned that lack of eye contact does not always equal lack of interest. The agent was asked to speak before a tribal council on a Southwestern reservation. Launching quickly into the presentation he observed that the council members were sitting there with their eyes closed. During a short break the agent asked his interpreter about this, as the agent figured this inattentive behavior meant failure for the proposal. However, when asked, the interpreter explained this to be a fairly common reaction and, in this culture, indicated interest not disinterest in the proposal.

There are two messages in this example: (1) nonverbal communication varies from culture to culture and (2) check, whenever possible, to see if you are accurately interpreting eye behavior.

Occasionally the message comes more directly. One agent, wearing sunglasses in the bright Arizona sun, approached a home, knocked, and received no reply. The agent knocked a second and third time believing someone was at home. At last an elderly woman came to the door, but in spite of several repetitions of the greeting did not respond. Finally, she looked at the agent, who had by this time decided she was deaf, and said, "Young man, I don't speak to people when I can't see their eyes."

Sunglasses don't provide for much eye contact and generally receive a negative reaction. This should be mentioned as several acquisition agents have noted that, since they work outside so frequently, sunglasses become a frequent artifact.

As a general rule, take sunglasses off when talking with people. You accomplish two things. You can nonverbally indicate you are now concentrating totally on the

person you are talking with and much better eye contact is established. Sunglasses, to some people, are like a moustache. What have you got to hide?

Moustaches bring us directly to the subject of personal appearance. Personal appearance is another important variable. Again it probably isn't so important after we know a person for awhile but initially we look at clothing, glasses, jewelry, shoes and other artifacts of personal appearance.

As with all nonverbal variables we can argue personal appearance shouldn't be so important. However, it is. In initial interactions we human beings have precious little to go on and personal appearance, possibly of necessity, becomes a factor.

At this point it is important to raise an issue related not only to personal appearance but to eye contact, handshakes, and all other nonverbal communication. We know these nonverbal behaviors are important but indicating exactly how they will be interpreted is currently impossible. There are certain suspicions. However, there is no lexicon of nonverbal communication as there is for verbal communication, i.e., words. Our interpretations are individual, often stereotyped, frequently unconscious, and largely not understood.

Facial expressions also are important in first impressions. A smile or indication of a smile is generally expected. Surely there are exceptions, but under ordinary circumstances, the intent is to, at least initially, create a friendly impression.

Most of us don't walk around practicing looking friendly, alarmed, helpful, joyful, or disgusted. Nonetheless, we assume if we are feeling these emotions, others are receiving the message. This turns out not always to be the case.

Take the case of the agent who believed she was appropriately facially conveying interest in the owner. The next thing she knew the owner asked why she never took anything seriously!

Gestures and postures convey important initial information. How we approach each other conveys a lot. How a person walks up to us, we believe, can say something more than how they talk.

In everyday conversation 18 to 24 inches is the comfortable speaking distance. Should this space be violated many of us become uncomfortable.

The same goes for how we sit when we meet someone. Does the person seem relaxed, tense, or thinking about something else?

Here as in other dimensions of nonverbal communication, the conclusions we draw about others and they draw about us are not necessarily correct. The point is that conclusions, right, wrong, or in between, are drawn.

The same goes for other dimensions of nonverbal communication. Space communicates. How close or far do you stand or sit from another?

Not only do we have personal space to consider but also "territory." The ethologists warn us about this in books like *The Territorial Imperative*. Humans, as well as animals, mark their space and set it apart. In many cases, humans see space as exclusively theirs.

Violating human territory can have disastrous consequences for the agent. The owner could well have his or her own chair, room, desk, or pen. The agent cannot always anticipate these. However, the agent can be alert to these realities.

Let's take an example. The agent walks into the owner's home. The owner offers a seat. The agent selects the owner's usual seat. The owner may not say anything but this *inadvertent* act starts the interaction off under less than ideal circumstances. "Is this ok?," or "Is it ok if I sit here?" could avoid this situation.

Time communicates. Are you late? Early? On time? Whatever, there is a message there.

Smell. What can be said about smell? Well for one thing after-shaves and perfumes create impressions. Some are put off by the smell of smoke, others by the smell of "coffee breath" or perspiration. Smell is probably an area of nonverbal communication that we don't give enough attention to. Smell is, after all, our longest lasting sense!

There is also communication through touch beyond the handshake. A pat on the back or a touch on the sleeve are some possibilities. In some situations it is important for the agent to give reassurance. Touch might be the way to do it. Once the agent becomes sensitive to the owner's nonverbal style the agent can determine whether or not touching is an appropriate form of communication.

"Paralanguage"

Beyond the nonverbal there are vocal cues, called "paralanguage," that convey a lot of meaning in initial encounters. Tone of voice, rate of speaking, pitch of the voice, and articulation all contribute to first impressions. These are all elements of what is technically called "paralanguage." "Paralanguage" refers to all those communicators that aren't words, but, nevertheless, convey meaning.

Pitch communicates. Unusually high or unusually low is remarkable. Rate or speed of speaking communicates. Volume or loudness communicates. Articulation and pronunciation are aspects of "paralanguage." Quality communicates and is probably the hardest to define. Quality is all those things that aren't pitch, rate, loudness, articulation, or pronunciation. Still, we interactively understand that vocal quality communicates.

Telephone conversation is a fine and commonly understood illustrator of the importance of "paralanguage." We all know that we gather impressions of "the other end of the line" by tone, pitch, rate, volume, articulation, pronunciation, and quality. The effective agent uses this paralinguistic dimension to advantage.

As with nonverbal dimensions of first contacts, paralinguistic contacts are not completely controllable. For one thing, interpretation of tone, rate and pitch is in the mind of the listener. One person's tone might be seen as reserved and dignified while another views the same and deems the tone cold and aloof.

Verbal Dimensions

So it is, too, with verbal initial impressions. Only the receiver makes the final determination. As Barnlund is frequently quoted as saying, "Meanings are in people, not in words."

Truly meanings are not in the words but the words contribute to the meanings. In first meetings the early words, as was mentioned before, are typically ritualistic:

"Hello, how are you?"

"I'm fine thank you. How are you?"

"I'm fine too. Nice weather."

"Sure is, the best so far this season."

"Quite a game last week, wasn't it?"

... and so forth.

Thus, early contact is usually lacking in depth content. In the critical impression stage, tentative conclusions about the

other person are frequently limited to this ritualistic or phatic communication stage.

Be alert to the ritualistic nature of early verbal communication and be able to effectively engage in "topics of trivia." Keep up with the teams, the weather, and the headlines. Keep reading. Be conversant on many topics. Not only is being well read necessary to remain an interesting person, but also it is necessary to remain a successful agent.

In verbal communication, keep in mind that we all appreciate "positive strokes." Sincere compliments to the owner are generally well received and start the conversation on a constructive, rather than destructive note.

Avoiding defensive communication is a good general guideline. Defensive communication occurs whenever a person perceives or anticipates threat. As a person becomes more and more defensive he or she becomes less and less able to accurately perceive what is occurring in the communication process.

Given the situation in which agents often initially meet owners it is of particular importance to minimize defense arousal and maximize defense reduction. According to Gibb defensive climates are characterized by: Evaluation, control, strategy,

neutrality, superiority, certainty. Supportive climates are characterized by: Description, problem orientation, spontaneity, empathy, equality, provisionalism.

Clearly one of the most challenging assignments related to verbal communication is for the agent to avoid eliciting an early defensive response. By following Gibb's suggestions and seeking a supportive climate those first four minutes of verbal contact can lead to productive future relationships.

Summary

First impressions are created within the first four minutes of contact. This is not to say these impressions cannot be changed. We can all recall examples of altered impressions. Surely, we tentatively decide we trust someone and then conclude the opposite or that we find someone initially stupid and later come to the opposite conclusion. However, it takes quite a while, as compared to a brief four minutes, to change this impression.

That it takes quite a while to change the initial impression is one major reason for attending to the first four minutes. It is here that the agent can maximally affect the subsequent communication.

The agent can influence the subsequent communication in at least three ways. The agent can be attending to: (1) nonverbal

communication, (2) paralinguistic and (3) verbal communication.

There are many dimensions of nonverbal communication including handshakes, eye contact, facial expressions, personal appearance, gestures, postures, space, time, smell and touch. Each plays a role in the nonverbal first impression.

Beyond the nonverbal, is the paralinguistic. In every interaction, tone of voice, rate, pitch, volume, articulation, pronunciation, and vocal quality of the voice convey meaning. In first encounters these dimensions are of even more than ordinary importance, since they are among the few things others have to go on.

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, we have verbal communication as part of the purveyor of initial information. In its early stages verbal communication is often ritualistic and lacking in depth communication. Nonetheless attention to verbal communication skills is essential.

The successful agent will keep all of these factors in mind in initial and subsequent interactions. Through attention to verbal, nonverbal, and paralinguistic factors operating in initial encounters agents can increase their effectiveness at this stage and all subsequent stages of contact with clients.

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