

First Impressions In Right-of-Way Acquisition

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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