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## FIRST IMPRESSION FAUX PAS

By Suzanne Bates

### Nightmare Scenarios

**Case #1:** When Northwestern University's national championship women's lacrosse team was invited to the White House, half of the players decided to wear flip-flops. Four of the nine women in the front row with President Bush in the now infamous picture were wearing the summery sandals. Their choice of footwear prompted a national "flip-flop flap."

**Case #2:** When a young attorney showed up for a mid-week business meeting (in downtown Boston) in a short sleeve, brown plaid shirt, the managing partner of the firm wondered about this lapse in judgment. Did it extend to his conversations or even advice to clients too?

**Case #3:** When the vice president of a major hotelier spilled a glass of red wine on the guest speaker, her co-workers stood silent, but horrified. Her tipsy manner was a major topic at the water cooler the next day.

### Question:

**Do first impressions matter, when no one can even locate an etiquette book in the library, and shorts and flip flops are standard attire in many companies?**

Studies show that you may have a minute or two to make a first impression – and the most of that happens in the first 7 seconds. What do people notice? Smile, eye contact, handshake, dress, grooming, voice, and much more. They make all kinds of assumptions about you – not just professionalism, polish, and manners; they're sizing up confidence, intelligence, and a host of other traits, in the time it takes to say hello.

People immediately notice your wardrobe and your demeanor. They also notice your ability to handle yourself, through introductions, conversation and manners. You may think that because the rules are more relaxed today you get a pass, but you don't. Even if people don't know all the

rules of business dress or etiquette, they know when they've met someone who's sharp, and positioned for a corner office job. And they know when you don't make the cut, either.

The apparent absence of rules doesn't get you off the hook. If you want to make it to the top of your industry or profession, you must know how the way you dress and handle yourself plays. You will be judged, and judged harshly by your peers, colleagues, clients and bosses – especially if you're trying to make it up in the ranks. We know this, because we receive calls every single day from companies that want us to help their new and even experienced leaders develop “executive presence.”

Many generation X and generation Y folks believe that they are changing, or making the rules, but most of them eventually learn, when they want to move up, that etiquette and business dress do matter. Wearing belly shirts and sandals or listening to iPods at the copy machine sends all the wrong signals to a boss who wants to promote you.

Even the family members of the championship lacrosse team expressed dismay, insisting the summer footwear staple was too casual for a visit with the president.

"Don't even ask me about the flip-flops," said the mother of one player. "It mortified me."

It would be easy to dismiss the business etiquette and image issues as part of a generation gap. But that would be a mistake. These are issues for people at every level – managers and leaders, too.

Many leaders and senior people assume that their knowledge and expertise is enough – and they assume it's what is going to take them to the top. Not so, if you look at the famous and widely quoted research done by psychologist Albert Mehranian.


The model suggests that only 7% of communication is verbal, 38% is vocal, while 55% is non-verbal. So when you meet someone for the first time, 93% of their first impression is influenced by your appearance, your body language, and your voice.

You know the old phrase – “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” Keep it in the back of your mind the next time you're at a networking event, meeting a new co-worker or especially going on a job interview. You may be “junior” today but someday they'll be thinking of you – exactly the way they remember you that first time you met!

### **What signals are you sending?**

So how do you know what signals you're sending? Start by asking a friend or trusted advisor these questions:

- What does my style of dress suggest to you?
- What does my grooming suggest to you?

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- What does my posture indicate to you?
  - How does the way I talk affect what you think of me?
  - How does the way I listen affect what you think of me?
  - What impression do my gestures leave you with?
  - What does my promptness (or lack of it) suggest to you?
  - From my level of eye contact, you'd guess that I...
  - From my level of attention, you think that I...
  - What does my level of involvement suggest to you?
  - From the way I interact with others in the session, you'd imagine that I....

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