

# How not to be the spitting image of a bad interviewee

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Positive impressions: what you say is only one factor involved in creating a professional image, writes Wendy Taylor.

It happens every day in HR departments and recruitment company offices. A candidate walks from the interview room, heart still racing but feeling enormous relief that the interview is over. Meanwhile, before he or she has even pushed the lift button, a disappointed interviewer will turn to colleagues and grumble: "But he sounded so perfect on paper."

According to people who spend a lot of time interviewing, even senior people with good track records working in blue-chip organisations often fail to live up to expectations. It's usually not a question of these candidates lacking the skills, knowledge or qualifications to do the job, but it's their presentation and attitude.

Anna Whitlam, director at Market U, a recruitment company that specialises in placing senior marketing and communications executives, says many factors contribute to a candidate presenting a professional image and making a positive impression on an interviewer. At a basic level it's about "the respect you show yourself and the respect you show others", she says. "You need to think of yourself as a brand."

Candidates who arrive late for interviews without calling to warn the interviewer, or even fail to arrive at an appointment, leave recruiters or clients doubting the person's organisational skills or wondering whether they treat their own clients or colleagues with the same lack of respect, she says. And while some interviewers may accept that a candidate's sloppy appearance is because "it's casual dress day at work", it's much safer to turn up to interviews neatly and smartly dressed.

Others fall down due to a lack of preparation. They struggle to articulate what they do in their current job or what they would like to do in their next. Conversely, being over-eager to impress can be just as dangerous. "People bring confidential company information in to an interview as examples of their work. Don't ever do this," she warns. "The client will be thinking, if you are doing this with your (current) company's private information, what will you do with ours?"

In other cases, candidates are well prepared and professional but simply forget to smile, so they appear to lack enthusiasm.

According to voice coach Annette Marks, from Voice Dynamics, when people are preparing for interviews or networking, they often overlook the role their voice plays in presenting a positive image. A failure to smile, which inevitably results in flat, monotone and boring voice, can be just one result, says Ms Marks.

People must understand that the moment they talk, listeners are making judgements about their credibility, sense of control and professionalism, she says. The pace and pitch of a person's voice are two critical factors influencing these judgements, she says.

"People talk too fast because they are wanting to get their message out quickly," she says. "They then sound nervous, and chaotic rather than calm and organised."

"Margaret Thatcher worked with a voice coach to lower her pitch by four octaves to convey authority," she cites as an example.

She suggests a range of strategies for people wanting to improve their voice quality including listening to recordings of their voice, role playing interviews with a friend or simply watching themselves talk in a mirror and seeing how their voice changes when they smile or are more animated.

Sue Currie, director of Shine Communications, runs corporate and public workshops on creating a powerful professional image and business social skills. She agrees with Ms Whitlam that first impressions count. "People are often not aware of the impressions they make. People need to realise that it happens fairly instantaneously, in the first 10 seconds or so," she says. "So if you're late (to an interview) or come in rushed or upset, that will stay in people's minds."

For many people, job offers stem from meeting people through networking rather than formal interview processes, so presenting well at such events is just as important. According to Ms Currie, as well as dressing appropriately, creating a positive image starts with being courteous and having good manners. "A common mistake people make is being a bit too pushy and thrusting a business card at people first off, but a networking event is about getting to know people and building relationships," she says. She advises people to remember why they have come to an event. "We have all been to networking functions where people have been chasing the waiters around," she says.

Further information: [A voice checklist is available at www.voicedynamics.com.au](http://www.voicedynamics.com.au)

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