

Image is everything

A pair of shoes or haircut shouldn't make the difference between landing a dream job and missing out on it but in a competitive world they can. When all else is equal between two candidates, an applicant who looks the part and exudes confidence has a huge advantage.

Image coaches say the importance of personal presentation and communication skills -- sometimes at the expense of ability and experience -- is not necessarily fair but can't be ignored.

Isabel Deeble, of *Empowering*, says studies back up the effectiveness of appearance and good communication in conveying a sense of confidence in a person's ability to do a job. "We only get one chance to create a positive first impression and people make all sorts of assumptions about us, right or wrong, based on physical appearance and personal presentation," she says.

"Judgments are made about our social position, income, level of education, character, what we wear and even on the other consumables we choose."

Deeble says image is vital not only at job interviews but on a daily basis when dealing with customers and clients and also with work colleagues.

Simple guidelines -- such as having clothes clean and neat, keeping nails clean and making direct eye contact -- are essential for creating the right impression to be taken seriously and considered for promotion.

Beyond this, employees need to consider the industry they work for and dress appropriately.

For instance, those working in law or insurance are expected to wear full corporate dress whereas employees in more creative occupations such as graphic design or marketing can be more trendy.

"Showing respect for the work culture is important because someone who doesn't do that can appear less competent and less credible," says Deeble.

Verbal communication is just as vital as appearance because incorrect or inappropriate speech can undermine what is being said, or cause a discrepancy between the image people see and what they hear. A professional voice should be firm, enthusiastic or warm as required and make full use of vocal variety to express vitality and interest. Habits to be avoided include an upward inflection at the end of the sentence, which conveys a need for approval, mumbling and a high pitched voice.

Deeble points to TV presenter Deborah Hutton, US politician Hilary Clinton and princess-to-be Mary Donaldson as high-profile women who successfully use image and voice training to appear dynamic and competent.

She suggests workers struggling with their voice or image may benefit from a professional group workshop or one-on-one coaching session to hone their skills. These can be particularly useful in ironing out specific speech problems, or determining the colour and style of clothes which suit them best.

Evelyn Lundstrom from *First Impressions* agrees. She says being well-groomed is a life skill that everyone should acquire.

"We all believe first impressions at some level, and it's self-sabotage not to present yourself well," she says.

"If someone's looking really sharp you can image them in a better role. I have seen people move up through the business ranks very, very quickly because they look like they fit the job."

While up-to-the-minute fashion can be fun to follow in certain industries, Lundstrom says it is more important to abide by the trends, which last for two or three seasons, such as women wearing more angular shoes and men shying away from double-breasted suits at the moment.

One of Lundstrom's favourite hints is coaching people to reflect the shape of their face in all the clothes and accessories they wear.

"For instance, if you've got a very round face then often pointy shoes do not suit you," she says.

"I can't imagine Arnold Schwarzenegger in rounded shoes or a polka dot tie because his face and style is very angular. Similarly, Danny De Vito would look strange in chisel-toed shoes."

She says many well-dressed people have an unconscious knack for presentation.

"The feeling of power and control they gain when they do this successfully is quite fantastic," Lundstrom says.

* Isabel Deeble and Evelyn Lundstrom are among the speakers at the Inspiring Women Conferences at Castle Hill on October 28 and North Sydney on October 30. For more information, call 96599166 or visit www.inspiringevents.com.au

Isabel's top interview tips

Clothing/grooming

Clothes must be in excellent condition, clean

Excellent fit, i.e. elegantly loose

Shoes clean and in good repair

Accessories that are simple, uncluttered

Men's tie should extend to belt buckle

Clean hair and skin

Nails clean, trimmed

Behaviour

Shake hands, firmly

Meet and greet assertively

Make direct eye contact

Convey positive energy, enthusiasm

Pay attention

Avoid distracting gestures

Use vocal variety; clear diction

Jo Rogers, The Daily Telegraph, October 18, 2003.