

# How to Make a Fantastic First Impression

(or...why we **ALL** fall for tall dark and handsome men!)

A Personal Guide by

**Sarah Graham**

I should start by saying that there are no original ideas in this guide. Everything I know, I have learned from others. I have given credit for the ideas where I can remember who originated them but I nearly abandoned this project halfway through writing it because I felt I should be able to 'prove' the theories by quoting all the psychological studies that underpin them. Instead, I'm writing this in the spirit of 'this is what I know' and I'll be happy to find the relevant study if anyone wants me to – so just ask!

My thanks go to everyone I have met in over 30 years in business (Arghh! That makes me feel old!) who has shared their insights and allowed me to experiment to find out what works. Being willing to change and adapt has helped me to move from a shy and (sometimes still) antisocial person to someone who feels really comfortable walking into any group of people or telephoning a stranger and, instead of worrying about what they might think of me, experience a sense of happy anticipation about the relationships that might develop.

## Why are first impressions important?

However much we say we are going to keep an open mind, it's impossible to do that in the first few seconds of meeting someone. We all make snap judgements based on the tiniest amount of information. We may be able to put those to one side and open our minds later (don't judge a book by its cover, my mother used to say) but because the first judgement we make is an unconscious one, we're often not aware of it at all so it's really difficult to take it apart and analyse it later. This means that we erect barriers between us and other people without even being aware of them.

What's worse is that, because of the way our minds work, if we do become aware of them, instead of telling ourselves it's ridiculous to dislike or distrust someone based on a snap judgement; we look for reasons to justify those feelings. (For more on this read Malcolm Gladwell's fabulous book, Blink)

## How many potentially really great relationships never get a second chance?

Whether we are in a social situation, an interview, a business meeting or any number of situations where we are likely to be judged in the first few seconds of meeting people for the first time, all of the issues discussed in this guide will come into play.

## What are first impressions based on?

These statistics are quoted in every book and article on First Impressions I've ever read. Thanks to Deborah Torres Patel [www.ExpressingYou.com](http://www.ExpressingYou.com) for finding the source for me.

- 55% is from visual impact, i.e. appearance, dress and body language;
- 38% from tone of voice;
- 5% from what we actually say.
- 2% from other senses

These statistics come from Albert Mehrabian's communication work in the 1970's and are explained in his 1981 published book "Silent Messages". You can order it here <http://www.kaaj.com/psych/smorder.html>. [www.kaaj.com/psych](http://www.kaaj.com/psych) is his website.

So most of the messages we receive in the first few seconds of meeting someone are visual. The sound of someone's voice is almost as powerful and it's only when we get a good response from these two senses that we start to listen to what is being said or get close enough, other than a brief handshake, to touch and smell them. I'm sure I'm right when I say that we never make a first impression of another person based on taste! Well, not in the networking groups that I belong to anyway!

In other words, almost every facet of our personality is judged from our appearance and our voice. (Just how long did you spend perfecting your elevator pitch?)

Now, there are some aspects of our appearance that we can control and some that we can't. Clothing, posture, gestures etc can all be modified but the three things that have the most impact are things we are stuck with.

## Visual messages we can't change

I heard a story recently about a man and his son who were involved in a serious car accident. The father was killed and the son was rushed to hospital for an emergency operation. The surgeon who was about to operate looked at the child and gasped, "This child is my son!"

## So who is the surgeon?

If you've heard this story before, think about the first time you heard it. Almost everyone, male and female, is so conditioned to surgeons being male that it takes a moment of thought to realise that the surgeon is the child's mother.

The main message we receive when we meet someone is whether they are male or female, the next one is about their race. The snap judgements we make about people depend on how we feel about issues of gender and race. This is not about whether people are the same or different to us, it is about the implicit (or unconscious) associations we make.

Implicit associations are made from all the data our brains have been processing all of our lives and they surface before we've had time to think. They aren't deliberate and can be completely incompatible with our conscious values. Before anyone gets hot under the collar & thinks I'm accusing them of being sexist or racist, that is not what this is about.

In an implicit association test (IAT) conducted by Harvard University, fifty thousand African Americans living in North America showed that about half of them had stronger positive associations with whites than blacks *because that was the information they lived with every day of their lives*. Their conscious, logical values may have been very different but the test was about the snap judgements we all make before we get a chance to think.

If you'd like to check your own implicit associations, there is a very well respected set of tests that you can take. Go to [www.implicit.harvard.edu](http://www.implicit.harvard.edu).

The next most powerful message we get is of someone's height. Now, we all know logically that height has absolutely nothing to do with anything much except the length of our trousers but there is plenty of evidence to suggest that in that powerful few seconds of snap judgement before logic kicks in, height is important, especially in men!

In telling how this judgement manifests itself, I can't compete with the fabulous article by journalist Jonathan Rauch "Short guys finish last" For the full article see here:

[http://www.jonathanrauch.com/jrauch\\_articles/height\\_discrimination\\_short\\_guys\\_finish\\_last/index.html](http://www.jonathanrauch.com/jrauch_articles/height_discrimination_short_guys_finish_last/index.html)

It starts by saying that even *pictures* of male babies, barely standing, who just appear to be tall, are perceived to be more able, capable and masculine than their shorter brethren. Both men and women see tall men as being more powerful and capable and early preference gives tall boys more confidence, completing the self-fulfilling prophecy.

As surgeon 'Hawkeye' Pierce says in MASH, "Radar, when I have time, I'll make you tall."

Our unconscious preference for tallness is shown in many research studies that followed thousands of participants in Britain and the United States from childhood to adulthood and examined details of their work and personal lives. The research

shows height is more important than gender in determining income. Almost all the heads of major companies are not only white and male, they are also taller than average.

(Height Discrimination Research:<http://www.baylor.edu/pr/index.php?id=18402>  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heightism>)

Having said this, I'm sure we all know people who are shorter than average height who command attention as soon as they walk into a room and exude a self-confidence and power that is very attractive. As well as lots of actors and musicians, a number of notable statesmen were/are less than 5'6" including Henry Kissinger, Ghandi, Khrushcov, Lenin, Belusconi and Perot. Film directors and producers Scorsese, Capra, Mayer, Lumet, Polanski, Selznick and George Lucas are all under average height as are footballers Nobby Stiles and Maradona and Formula One driver Jacques Villeneuve.

Could it be that in some people a big personality, a zest for life and creative ambition are so attractive that physical stature is less important? Or is it that learning to overcome early discrimination has made these guys extra determined to succeed? I'll come back to this factor several times as it seems to be the answer for those of us who don't fit the typical physical ideal!

Being aware of the effect that gender, race and height have on our unconscious perceptions doesn't mean that we are immune from them but we can at least make a conscious decision to challenge any 'instinctive' reactions we have to people and ask ourselves if these factors are involved.

## **Visual messages we *can* control**

Three blonde men are stranded on an island. Suddenly a fairy appears and offers to grant each one of them a wish. The first blonde man asks to be intelligent. Instantly, he is turned into a brown-haired man and swims off the island. The next one asks to be even more intelligent than the previous one, so he is turned into a black-haired man, builds a boat and sails off the island. The third blonde man asks to become even more intelligent than the previous two. The fairy turns him into a woman, and she walks across the bridge.

### **Does hair colour really count?**

The majority of the world's populations have dark hair. Natural blonde is rare and for some reason perceived as desirable in women but not in men – unless that is you are a woman who wants to be taken seriously. Blonde is still associated with dumb and first unconscious perceptions are that a brunette is likely to be brainier.

Scientists like to attribute this to the mating game, going back to the Stone Age and suggest that the preference for blond haired women is more to do with their skin tone – a lighter tone being an indication of fertility.

What started out as a biological choice may have turned into a social preference and it is likely that the roots (sorry!☺) of our current day instinctive perceptions stem from Hollywood's obsession with blond villains.

The row about the most recent actor to be cast in the role of James Bond, Daniel Craig, centered on the fact that he is blond and that this goes against the stereotype. We all know that the dumb, muscled henchmen in the Bond movies are blond and the hero has dark hair – even if it is a toupee (ah, now there was a leading man...) In the film *Batman Begins*, you can tell that Mr. Earle, the executive in charge of Wayne Enterprises, is up to no good because he is played by Rutger Hauer —the blond Dutchman who in *Nighthawks* plays a terrorist, and in *Blade Runner*, a homicidal android. Remember Alan Rickman in Bruce Willis's *Die Hard*? And Sean Bean almost always gets cast as a villain.

Exactly why Hollywood hates blond men almost as much as it loves blonde women is not clear. There are some theories that it is a payback from Jewish film makers to the Aryan image but the fact is that it is a perception that most of us have grown up with and why very few blond men have the instant appeal of men with darker hair (except for Robert Redford, of course, who was also short – but then there's an exception to every rule). And before you start quoting Beckham and Pitt, they both dye their hair – oh, yes they do - and sandy-haired Elvis dyed his black! (Hair Colour Research: Anthropologist Peter Frost)

## So what about the handsome bit?

That's a no-brainer. Physically attractive people are ...well, attractive. From earliest childhood attractive children are favoured by family members, teachers and strangers. This increases their confidence which is also an attractive attribute and is reflected in the way they come across to strangers. (Read Nancy Etcoff's book 'Survival of the Prettiest')

Before you rush off screaming "It's not fair!" remember that we're only talking about first impressions – the first few seconds of meeting someone. There just aren't enough tall dark and handsome men to run the whole world and, thank goodness, some of them aren't that bright, so that gives the rest of us a chance, even if it is as second choice.

Actually, beauty really is a difficult thing to pin down – a face that is open and shows a lively interest in others, a sense of fun, trust or kindness will have more appeal than an arrogant or self-absorbed beauty. The attractiveness of the personality that shows up in the first glance is much more influential than a superficial physical beauty.

Talented people who also happen to be attractive know there is a downside to the 'beauty' perception. "To work hard, as I've worked, to accomplish anything, and then have some yo-yo come up and say. 'Take off those dark glasses and let's have a look at those blue eyes' is really discouraging." **Paul Newman**

It is just as easy to dismiss an attractive person and not take them seriously as it is to swoon and offer them the moon – it all depends on our own perception.

The classic tale of how we can all be taken in by the “tall dark & handsome male” is that of Warren Harding, the 29<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. It is widely accepted by his biographers that Harding was popular with the electorate because he ‘looked like a president’. Add to his imposing physical presence a deep and resonant voice and most people ignored that fact that he couldn’t string two coherent sentences together. All this happened in 1921 – people wouldn’t be taken in so easily now, would they? He only served one term and was widely regarded as the worst president the US has ever had. So far..... (See biographers Harry Daugherty & Andrew Sinclair)

## **All of which makes it really important to get the rest right!**

So, for those of us who are not tall dark & handsome, should we just curl up in a corner or can we still make a good first impression? Fortunately, (or this would be a very short report) the answer is YES.

The rest of the visual impression we give out is something we can control and is affected as much by our personality as by the external modifications we can make. I’ll come back to that later (OK I know I’m teasing, but it’s worth the wait, honestly!)

Before plastic surgery was widely available, both men and women relied on their clothing to create the best impression. In the days when men wore tights, they would pad out thin calves with special inserts, wear exaggerated codpieces and pad the shoulders and chests of their doublets! When childbearing was the main focus of female attractiveness they wore fashions that made them look as though they had ample hips. (“Bring back the old days!” I hear hundreds of women cry!)

If you are in any doubt at all that physical appearance has a huge impact on the way others judge us, take a look at the reports compiled here: <http://www.about-face.org/r/facts/bi.shtml>. According to the Plastic Surgery Statistics the number of plastic surgery patients has steadily increased 153% from 1992-1998, the overwhelming majority of the patients (91%) is female.

Among the findings are these facts: the average size of idealized woman, as portrayed in the media, has become progressively thinner and has stabilized at 13-19% below physically expected weight. At the same time we have all got fatter! In 1960-62, the average man weighed 166.3 pounds. By 1999-2002, the average had reached 191 pounds. Similarly, the average woman’s weight rose from 140.2 pounds to 164.3 pounds.

Thinness has not only come to represent attractiveness, but also has come to symbolize success, self-control and higher socioeconomic status. No wonder the dieting industry is predicted to be worth over \$60 billion by 2008!

## Depressed yet? Go buy some shoes!

Our dress and grooming are largely a question of personal taste and if you have any doubts at all about this aspect of your appearance, there is plenty of help available to both men and women from Image Consultants. If you are not someone who notices whether suits have two or three buttons this season, whether shoulder pads are in or out or handbags small or large, don't be fooled into thinking these things don't matter. There are plenty of people who notice these details and will make judgments based on the type of tie and earrings we wear (always a fetching combination, I think!). If it is important to us to be accepted in these circles we need to be aware of the fickleness of fashion!

If we want to make a good first impression, dress needs to be appropriate to the situation and occasion. Clothes are the easiest way to create impressions – good and bad. In a recent episode of 'The Apprentice', one of the contestants was compared to a used car salesman 'but wearing worse suits'. As we all tend to wear 20% of our wardrobe 80% of the time it is generally better to wear good quality items lots of times than have many cheaper ones.

Appearance carries such powerful messages that it not only affects the snap judgments of first impressions but can change the way we are treated by people who know us well. My son, at the age of 15, dyed his hair blue as an experiment. Nothing else about his appearance or behaviour changed. He was an average student and continued to be polite, punctual and obedient. However, the behaviour of his teachers changed dramatically and he found he was treated dismissively, impolitely and with great suspicion by people who had known him for four years!

Wearing the 'right' clothes and accessories is a great source of confidence for many people. There are few of us who can follow the advice the old country squire who decided that it didn't matter what he wore because "in the country everybody knows me and in town, no-one knows me". According to John T. Molloy, author of *New Dress for Success*, clothes are used as a tool to control how others react to and treat us.

## And the other visual messages?

These are usually lumped together under the title 'body language'. They include our facial expressions, gestures and posture.

Non-verbal signals have five times the impact of verbal messages. When the verbal and the non-verbal parts of the message are congruent, the observer believes what they hear and see, but if they are not congruent, the observer is more likely to believe what they see than what they hear.

A genuine smile, confident posture, eye contact and a firm (not crushing or wet fish) handshake are the keys to a good first impression.

There are many, many books on body language. Allan Pease is probably the most prolific author on the subject but one that makes it easy to look up individual gestures is 'The Nonverbal Dictionary of Gestures, Signs & Body Language Clues from Adam's-Apple-Jump to Zygomatic Smile' by David B. Givens.

## **Is that a zygomatic or are you just pleased to see me?**

The really heartfelt (or zygomatic!) smile is controlled by emotions. It moves our cheekbones which make our eyes crinkle and it is really difficult to fake. So do we need to feel happy before we can produce a genuine smile? Fortunately, a forced smile can fool the brain into thinking that we are happy and endorphins are released which makes us really feel happy so a false smile can quickly become a real one!

The same thing can happen with posture. Nerves may be crushing us and forcing our head down into our shoulders but straightening up and raising the chin has a dramatic effect on the way we feel as well as the way we look. It is almost impossible to feel nervous if we have a confident body posture. I used to think that the mind controlled the body and in order to act in a confident way I had to feel confident but it works the other way round too! (Read almost any book on NLP by Richard Bandler or John Grinder.) What's more it's great fun practicing this – next time you're feeling angry about something, try dancing in a really sexy way & feel your mood change!

When we talk to someone we like or are interested in, our body language starts to match theirs. If you want to help someone feel comfortable just start to mirror how they're standing or sitting.

Eye contact is easy if we are genuinely curious about the person we're meeting but should only last about three seconds otherwise we're liable to make the other person feel uncomfortable. Making eye contact across a crowded room and raising both eyebrows gives the impression that we know someone & makes it easier to start a conversation – try it!

However much of a good first impression we make, careless body language can ruin it very quickly. Jiggling coins, biting nails, flicking hair and scratching or poking various body parts are just some of the irritating things that can ruin the hard won approval of the first few seconds.

## **And then we open our mouths and .....**

Remember the first time you hear David Beckham speak? For a lot of people it must have been a bit like when the silent movie stars were heard for the first time in the 'talkies' – the image just doesn't match the voice and no matter how talented and likable the guy is, it's hard to take him seriously.



Imagine your favourite dramatic or romantic actor: Sean Connery, Richard Burton (showing my age again!), Clive Owen, George Clooney, Morgan Freeman, Tom Cruise, Allan Rickman, Brad Pitt (Wow! He's got a great voice!). Picture whichever one you fancy and imagine him saying a few lines with the voice of Woody Allen or TV Actor Ricky Tomlinson. It just doesn't work does it?

Similarly, picture Joanna Lumley, Judi Dench, Julia Roberts, Halle Berry or Cate Blanchett delivering their lines in the voice of Jane Horrocks, Rosanna Arquette or Patsy Palmer (Rickaye....!)

This is not just a question of accent or the image associated with the voice, it is all about the tone. Perhaps the best illustration is the recent TV adverts for Marks & Spencer's food. The voice over is done by beautiful and talented Irish actress Dervla Kirwan (Ballykissangel, Goodnight Sweetheart, 55 Degrees North, Casanova). Dervla has a soft, lilting voice but in the TV adverts (This is not just food, this is M&S food) the tone is smug and sickly and has alienated as many people as the wonderful images have attracted.

### **It's not what you say; it's the way that you say it!**

*"Seeking call center professional who is tired, bored, unenthusiastic, apathetic and conveys an overall disinterest during the greater part of the day."*

According to Kent State University researchers Stanford W. Gregory, Jr. and Stephen Webster, people unconsciously adapt to each other's voice tones. The researchers suggest that when two people converse, the person who has the lowest frequency is perceived as the most dominant.

Remember what happened when Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister? She was advised that to give herself more credibility her voice should be lower and she completely changed her vocal tone – but not very successfully. Check out your own voice by listening to a recording and if you decide you'd like it to be lower and more authoritative just drink lots of whisky and smoke cigars! This may lead to lowering the tone of more than your voice so, fortunately, a less risky way is to breathe deeply, drink lots of water, avoid caffeine and, if necessary, take voice lessons.

In a similar way to mirroring body language, we can help people to feel comfortable with us if we adopt the same tone, pitch and speed of speech. Don't take this too far though – I can remember getting into trouble for imitating people without realising I was doing it!

Most of us spend a lot of time before interviews and networking meetings preparing what we are going to say and although this is important for the period after the first few seconds, it could all be wasted because, no matter how slick or interesting our words are, they will not help us to recover from a poor first impression.

When we make the best possible first impression, we have our audience in the palm of our hands. When we make a poor first impression, we lose their attention and it is very difficult to recover from that.

We can learn to make a positive and lasting first impression and modify it to suit any situation. Doing so requires us to assess and identify our personality, physical appearance, lifestyle and goals.

## The Law of Attraction

I'm going to say that last bit again because it's really the whole point of this report.

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It may seem from all of the above that if we are not blessed with the physical attributes that are perceived as desirable we might as well pick up our bat and ball and go home but this is really not the case.

It is true that there is not much we can do to change the initial perception of our gender, race or height, but there is a huge amount we can do about the rest of the impression we create and most of it is internal rather than external.

There are people who can walk into a room and attract attention simply because they have charisma. This comes from a personal assurance that has only a little to do with the way they look. The most attractive feature anyone has is self-esteem (self confidence is about doing – self esteem is about being).

Churchill, Napoleon and Martin Luther King had charisma. It is often easier to identify than it is to explain.

British Professor Richard Wiseman conducted a study involving more than 200 people and concluded that: "When we see someone else who has charisma, without realising it, we mimick their posture and their facial expressions. An obvious example is when someone smiles at us and we smile back. Our posture influences our emotions. We're unaware that we're mimicking this person, although we know they make us feel happy."

Professor Wiseman estimates charisma is 50% innate and 50% learned.

Broadcaster and confidence tutor Jeremy Milnes agrees that techniques can make a huge transformation, and says "There are some people who are just lucky buggers and are just naturally charismatic, like Johnny Depp, David Bowie and Marilyn Monroe, but I honestly believe that these are techniques and skills which can be learnt and practiced and can be made part of our own behaviour."

## The dreaded G. word!

I know, I know! Most people hate talking about goals (and it's not just those who hate football!) The truth is that it's an overused concept but a vastly underused technique. It is still true, I believe, that most people put more effort into planning their holidays than planning their lives. I'm told that it has to do with a fear of failure and that if we don't say where we intend to go we can end up anywhere & no one can blame us. Doh!

A major factor in being comfortable with who we are is having a goal or a vision for our lives. By setting goals we can measure and take pride in our achievements. We can see progress and increase self-confidence as we recognize our ability and competence.

A favourite goal setting technique is to imagine a time five years in the future and decide what achievements we'd like to have had by then and what kind of lifestyle and relationships we want. Bringing the timescale down to three years, then two then one, we can detail the achievements in each stage that will bring us closer to our major goal. Continuing with the process into six months, three months and then breaking it down into weeks will help us to decide on what our first baby steps will be in achieving our major goal and give us the chance to celebrate as each part of the journey is completed.

Walking into a room and knowing that we are comfortable about who we are, what we want and where we are going is hugely attractive.

## **So what's your sign?**

That's so eighties! Cross out 'sign' & put 'brand' instead.

Some time ago I was making excuses about not doing things I wanted to do because other people were better qualified and more experienced. I was pulled up and given a verbal slap by a wise friend who told me that what I had and what all these other people didn't was the power to be me, and that this was really important. I don't think anyone had heard of 'personal branding' at the time but it is certainly a force to be reckoned with!

If you are not sure about whether you are giving the impression that you'd like to give, try this game with some friends.

Most well known commodities have a recognisable brand consisting of a logo, a strap line and a tune. For example, Nike has their tick, 'Just Do It' and 'A little less conversation, a little more action.'

Personal Branding is a fun way to discover any gaps between how you think you come across to others and how you actually come across. Decide on your own logo, strap line and tune and then ask your friends what they think your personal branding should be. Choose people who are helpful and not destructive and if you do this with others, be kind!

These are some of the things to think about while you are doing it:

- **Motivation.** What turns you on? Learning something new? Gaining recognition for your skills? What's your personal definition of success? Money? Power? Fame? Or doing what you love?
- **Reputation.** What is your reputation with the people you know? Are you well-respected? Trusted? Liked?
- **Network.** Who knows about you? How many people would have heard of your name?
- **Mission Statement.** What is your purpose? (The best answer I've ever heard to this is "That everyone who meets me will be glad that they did." from Clive Gott)
- **Presence.** Do people remember you? Do you make other people feel special and important? What impact do you have on the people you meet and work with?
- **Passion.** Are you proud of what you do? Do you talk passionately about it? Does your energy for what you do inspire other people?
- **Consistent Persistence.** Do you have staying power? Do you make a consistent and concerted effort to achieve your goals?
- **Killer question.** What do you want to be famous for?

Self-esteem influences everything in the way we are perceived by others. It is the key to developing charisma. Our body language and tone of voice will improve and, when we are not deeply wrapped up in our own concerns, we will come across as much more interesting because we are free to be interested in others.

This is really powerful because, after that first meeting, people may not remember how we look or what we say but they WILL remember how we made them feel.

### **To successful first impressions and subsequent great relationships!**

Sarah Graham

Inspired!

[www.directsales-inspiration.com](http://www.directsales-inspiration.com)

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