

Interview Know-How: Combatting First Impression Bias

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As children, we're told not to judge a book by its cover. A person's looks can be deceiving; it's what's inside that counts.

But we grow up and find out fast that the world doesn't operate this way. In fact, according to "[Face Value: The Irresistible Influence of First Impressions](#)," a new book by Princeton University psychology professor Alexander Todorov, we're genetically programmed to make [snap character judgments](#) about people based on facial features. Apparently, from early childhood, we've all committed to memory what we consider typical and atypical faces, and those differ depending on where around the globe you grow up. Todorov says if strangers look like us and our friends, we judge them more favorably. And if they resemble people we don't like, we form negative impressions. "We trust people who are similar to our tribe and distrust people who are dissimilar," notes Todorov. Facial features such as the width of our eyes and the position of our eyebrows all speak to potential interviewers before we do.

It's scary to think that people we've never met before are assessing things like our trustworthiness and dominance by our facial features – before we've even opened our mouths to tell them who we are. In one chapter of his book, Todorov describes an experiment in which participants judged job applicants with faces similar to former successful employees as more qualified than applicants who resembled former unsuccessful employees. This despite contrary information on all the applicants' resumes. Todorov has found we have a tendency to "overgeneralize from the immediate facial cues" and apply these generalizations to an individual's potential abilities and character. As proof of this, in another example, he shows two photos of the same individual but in one, the person has been sleep-deprived for 31 hours. Study participants (unaware of the sleep deprivation) perceived the sleep-deprived individual in the photo as "less healthy, less attractive, and less intelligent."

Before a [job interview](#), you most likely spend a lot of time prepping and grooming for your time with a hiring manager. It's best to look as polished as possible. Dress appropriately for the interview, based on your research of the company and the position for which you're applying. Be personable; smile and engage the interviewer. Think positively, and be confident. However, it's doubly important that you prepare for an interview, selling yourself as the competent, experienced professional you are. Here are some helpful tips:

1. **Be mindful how your facial features or expressions may be interpreted.** Maybe you tend to furrow your brows when you get nervous, or you maintain a stiff and serious expression in interviews. Stand in front of the mirror and practice loosening up and smiling before an important interview. Be mindful of how different expressions may be interpreted.
2. **Do your research.** Go in knowing who your future employer is, their company history, products, competition and industry ranking. You may want to browse through their latest annual report (usually available in the investor section on a company's website). Check out LinkedIn and other social media to find out information on your interviewer. Perhaps you'll find something in common with them that you can talk about in the interview.
3. **Be prepared and sell yourself.** Prepare talking points for how you'll answer those [common interview questions](#), e.g., "Tell me about yourself," or "What have you learned from your mistakes?" Talk about personal goals, strong work habits, examples of how you solved problems and your best soft skills, such as that you work well with others or you're a good leader.
4. **Highlight your past experiences.** And back them up with specific success stories, including

sound bites describing milestones you achieved in your last position. For example: "My marketing campaign increased sales by 15 percent." In fact, go in with several of these short statements describing accomplishments.

5. **Ask questions.** Demonstrate to your future employer that you're interested in the job. Among key [questions to ask](#): details on the day-to-day responsibilities of the job (to ensure you've addressed all topics), their expectations for the first few months in the role and where the company is headed in the near future.

It's human nature to try and read others by facial features – Todorov has confirmed that through his research. That's something we can't get around. But [when interviewing for a job](#), you can improve your demeanor with your actions, knowledge and ability to sell yourself. It's important to be engaged, positive and friendly. And yes, a good, polished appearance is a must. But more importantly, be well-prepared with information that shows you're engaged in knowing about your potential employer – and your interviewer – to make the best impression of all.

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