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A Second Chance for a First Impression

5 ways to redo that first encounter

You've certainly heard the adage that you don't get a second chance to make a good first impression. What if there was a way to create the environment for a makeover of that original first impression? About every six months a marketing research firm contacts me. I started going to their location a few years ago for studies on topics like teashops, men's television viewing habits and underarm deodorant. I have since been promoted to the in-home camera interview. Six months ago I gave a detailed account how the maker's of the Centrum multi-vitamin could be more creative in their marketing efforts. I looked straight into the camera and said, "What if Centrum could be shrunk inside the body and went on a voyage much like the ship in that 1960's movie, "Fantastic Voyage?"

I must have made a good first impression. This time they sent a four-person interview team to do a study about men's pants. I had a cameraman, an interviewer, and two 'observers' or perhaps mental health evaluators. We spoke about how I purchase men's pants and the qualities I seek. Some of the questions were a little myopic for my taste, but I pressed on for curiosity's sake. Ok, getting paid for the study had something to do with the motivation to keep going too. After a good hour of questions the entire crew wanted to see my small closet. It's a good thing my Mother taught me to keep my closet tidy. I narrated the clothes in my closet; their history and how they are arranged as if I was doing a travel show to attract off-season tourists. Next, I had to pull out all of my casual pants and trousers and put them on the bed. The 'crew' wanted to film them and see everything in one pile. "Hey I thought I was the star!"

One of the observing women wanted me to put on an outfit that I would wear to a client for an initial meeting. I didn't realize that I had to do a fashion show on top of the closet invasion! I changed into one of my new suits and a crisp blue shirt and sweater. The video camera kept rolling, as did a still camera. I was beginning to think that this crew was a front for 'America's Extreme Wardrobe Makeover.' My next task was to put on an outfit that was reminiscent of a second or third client appointment. I had no idea where this was going, but I was going to kick them out of the house if they wanted me to don my pajamas. I put on a pair of trousers and another button down shirt. The cameras kept rolling. The crew looked at the time and said, "We need to hurry to the Banana Republic and



Gap stores around the corner to do some 'on the fly' shopping before the end of the study.

Driving to the store, I was wondering when my video clip would show up on Youtube.com or another website. I haven't had this much fun in front of the camera since I was in my high school modeling club. Back then I was filmed advertising an umbrella. I twirled it around my arm and before it made a complete revolution, I smacked myself in the face. A few seconds later I opened it up, tripped and fell to the floor since I couldn't see where I was going. I was henceforth asked to make humorous modeling videos after everyone else was allowed out in public. We walked through the front doors of the Banana Republic and they asked me to narrate the entire experience. I opted for my incognito voice as if the 'crew' and me weren't attracting enough customer attention.

After Banana Republic and a stop at a redesigned and disappointing Gap, we sat down at a local Starbucks where I was asked to play 'guess the clothing brand.' They must have had too much caffeine and thought I was a former retail executive who could give them the 'holy grail' answer on how to make the best men's casual pants. I guessed a few top brands for the clothing I saw, but was wrong on all counts. It was revealed to me that Dockers was making this hip new clothing. I was shocked! I have an image of Dockers being this generic brand of men's pants that are worn on casual days to the office. I even went so far as to say that the name Dockers reminds me of those sailing shoes, Docksidiers. Docksidiers are no fashion icon either.

Next the two casual observers were revealed to be executives of Dockers, one being the Director of Retailing. I was asked if I would give Dockers another chance. Looking back I should have

asked for a free pair of pants too. First I was impressed that people from the company wanted to meet with members of the public instead of waiting behind closed doors for the marketing research report. These executives were hearing from me and dozens of people across the country first hand. Second they really seemed to be sincere and valued my opinion. They asked meaningful questions and listened. There was not any hint of defensiveness although they could always view the video and shout obscenities at me in absentia. From what I saw in the Dockers' photographs, I was intrigued enough with their new 'look' to put them on my list of places to visit for my next purchase of casual pants.

How can you change the initial impression you make? When I work with executives on their presentation skills we often use the lessons employed by the Dockers executives. If you made a terrible first impression or want to significantly improve the one you currently have, you need to do the following,

- (1) *Meet in person - this tells your customers, prospects or even friends that you think they are important,*
- (2) *Ask thoughtful questions - when you ask relevant questions it shows that your effort was well thought out. Spending time preparing equates to a greater feeling of worth on the part of others,*
- (3) *Listen without judgment - in order to value another person's opinion fully, we must listen without making an opinion,*
- (4) *Present a united front - you need to know what you stand for consistently in order for others to respect you, and*
- (5) *Be patient - it takes time to change an initial first impression. It might take months or years.*

The Dockers executives are very patient. They estimate it will take five years to change the initial impression of their brand. When I work with executives to improve their presentation skills, we achieve the best results over an extended period of time. This results in long-lasting changes versus the 'quick-fix' mentality that often pervades corporate America. The next time you goof and make a poor first impression take heart. When you keep meeting in person, ask thoughtful questions, listen without judgment, present a united front and are patient, you will get a second chance to remake your first impression.

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