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# Standing Out: Your First Impression as a Presenter

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**A**s children we learn to “never judge a book by its cover.” As adults working in the business world, however, it’s difficult to put this old adage into practice. Although we don’t like to think that appearances matter, often the first thing we notice about a person is what he or she is wearing.

Whether we like it or not, the minute we step in front of an audience, they begin to make numerous judgments about us without our permission. Thoughts like: “she has a commanding presence,” “that suit doesn’t fit him very well,” or “I wonder where that accent is from” all play a role in how people perceive not only us, but also our abilities as presenters.

As an independent corporate speaker and trainer, I have taught hundreds of business people in countless facilities both here and abroad. Though each audience and presentation is unique, one constant for me is the need to feel comfortable while looking professional at the same time.

Here are some tips and techniques that I have found most helpful in preparing for a successful presentation.

## DRESSING PROFESSIONALLY

Appearing professional is crucial in any job, especially in the role of the presenter. Because clothes are a nonverbal code of communication, it’s important that the visual signals we put out there, based on our appearance, speak of our professionalism. To form this professional image, I have created a wardrobe that connects and complements my hair, skin, eye tones and body scale.

Because of my dark auburn hair, pale skin and green eyes, I often choose rich teal blues and emerald greens. Someone with olive-toned skin and brown eyes, on the other hand, would look best in French blue, lavender, and spice tones of nutmeg, paprika and cinnamon.

While choosing a wardrobe is specific to each individual’s distinct physical characteristics and coloring, there are some constants for dressing professionally. Proper grooming is a key part of the equation: trimmed, clean nails; styled, neat-looking hair; pressed clean clothes. Attention to detail is the next step, as it can take any wardrobe to the next level. Polished shoes. Properly tailored suits, jackets, pants and dresses. Updated eyeglasses. Fresh-looking jewelry and handbags. Neat-looking facial hair on men and well-applied makeup on women. These little things make an enormous impact in establishing a personal, signature look that is still professional.

## CREATING AN AUTHORITATIVE LOOK

Creating and maintaining a professional image is important in any employment capacity. In addition to this, trainers should also strive to project an image of authority, as participants are looking to us to be experts in our presentation material.

The strongest way to do this is to dress in three pieces. Adding another garment to the look aids in finishing the style you pulled together. As an example, if you are wearing a blouse and pants, you may wish to drape yourself in a scarf or a pashmina



wrap, or tie a lightweight sweater around your shoulders to complete the image. In the summer when it may be too warm, consider accessorizing your outfit, especially near the face, e.g. earrings or a necklace. For men, a jacket, lightweight wool slacks, and an open-necked, pressed shirt with french cuffs are a great option to a full suit and tie. For women I recommend either a jacket or a dressy sweater set and tailored pants.

To complete a more authoritative look, make sure to fully accessorize. Shoes should be nicely polished. If you have salt stains on your shoes, apply vinegar before you polish. Women should wear a low but professional-looking heel, especially since the feet are the foundation of our body weight. There are many comfortable and fashionable options out in the market for men and women today. Sources such as [zappos.com](http://zappos.com) and [shoe-buy.com](http://shoe-buy.com) Web sites provide many good options. Women should also wear natural fibers for maximum comfort with a little spandex for ease, and have nails polished in a neutral tone.

## HAVING VISUAL APPEAL AS A PRESENTER

It's important to remember that as a presenter, I will be a strong focal point for my audience during much of the training. I want my audience to focus on the content of my presentation, not to be distracted by my attire. When selecting my wardrobe, I avoid flashy designs and distracting patterns.

Color choice is also important. Red, for example, is too bright to wear as a presenter because the human eye tires of looking at it over time. Audience members will have to periodically look away in order to give their eyes a break from the strong red. Instead of bright and metallic colors, I wear shades that are visually harmonious with my hair, skin and eye color because this creates and communicates credibility. When the audience looks at you, your eye should follow from your innate color tones and back down to the garments closest to the face. This is called visual harmony, when the clothes closest to the face complement your innate color tones.

## COMFORT AND FIT OF CLOTHES

While choosing professional, authoritative and visually appealing clothes is crucial to impressing my audience, comfort is another important consideration. As a presenter, I want to feel at ease moving around the room and comfortable on my feet. Wearing natural fibers is always a good choice. Depending on the season, these materials include: cotton, linen blends, wools (both lightweight and heavy) and silk. Clothing made from such fibers not only fall over the body naturally, they also allow for maximum cooling because they don't cling as much. Of these fibers, I usually choose a knit top for under my jacket because this wrinkles less than a blouse and provides more give. I feel less constrained as I present, and when my presentation includes interactive exercises, I am more comfortable while moving about the room.

## SIMPLE SET-UP TIPS

Choosing professional-looking and comfortable outfits as a presenter helps me feel sharp, self-confident and prepared. Here are some additional preparation strategies that also contribute to feeling confident and ready to go.

The first step is to simply be organized and prepared. Pack materials and clothes the night before. One essential presenter tool is a personal kit that can include: toothpaste and toothbrush, mouthwash, make-up, mirror, hairbrush, liquid Band-Aid (good for stockings or skin), a sewing kit, extra socks/stockings, mints, pen and writing pad, and a few healthy snacks.

The morning of the presentation, I eat a high-protein breakfast to give me energy and drink lots of water so I stay hydrated. I also carry Yogi tea called "Throat Comfort," which keeps my throat moist so I don't sound scratchy while presenting.

I always arrive at my destination early to allow time for navigating in a new facility and finding help in setting up the room if needed. I use roller luggage to easily transport my presentation materials. Once

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onsite I like to meet the key people who are hosting me. I wear comfortable shoes and take off my jacket while setting up and breaking down the training room. To ensure a smooth training session, I always double check the equipment: microphone, PowerPoint projector and handouts.

Because I've planned plenty of time, I use the last 15 minutes before presenting to mentally prepare. I take one more look in the mirror for a watery eye or lopsided jewelry to ensure I feel fresh. Then I take 10 minutes to quiet my mind before I am introduced so my thoughts are centered and my energy is high and ready to go.

## SUCCESS

As a presenter, there is much to juggle when preparing for a presentation. I have followed these simple steps for the last 15 years and know that they have helped me in my success as a corporate trainer and speaker. Knowing I look my best as a professional gives me confidence and poise. Being

organized and prepared ensures I have a smooth presentation. With all of these details taken care of, I look and feel sharp as I work with my audience. What a great way to begin a session!

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