

10 Things

10 ways to present yourself more professionally

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Takeaway: Whether you're delivering a speech, running a meeting, or interviewing for a job, these tried-and-true tricks can make you come across as confident and professional.

So you're getting ready for that big presentation. Your PowerPoint is perfect, you know your facts, and you're ready to go. Only thing is... you're lacking that certain polish to tip the scales in your favor.

When it comes to interviews, presentations, important meetings, and any situation where you need to make a stellar impression, looking professional is just as important as being professional. But looking professional means more than just having a top-of-the-line briefcase, Italian shoes, the best laptop money can buy, and a bright smile that would shame a Hollywood celebrity. In this article, I'm going to share some tips you may never have thought of in the course of your career. Chances are, one (or more) of these tips will help you win over a crowd, land that job, or impress the higher ups.

1: Dress the part

Standard business fare most often will do for your average meeting. But when you raise the bar of importance, you must match it with your personal appearance. And this doesn't stop at your neck. Not only should you be wearing your best suit, you should make sure you are properly groomed. Don't think your hair can go "one more week" before you get it cut. And get it cut a couple of days before the big to-do. And your clothing shouldn't just *look* good; it should also be comfortable. The last thing you want is to be in front of a crowd and notice your pants are too tight or too loose or your shoes are killing your feet. If you have to wear heels, don't wear heels that are too high. And do NOT forget antiperspirant. Now you may be thinking these are all very obvious tips, but people can (and often do) overlook the obvious.

2: Warm up

You may not know this but your body, and your ability to present yourself, is directly affected by its state of being. If you get up to do a presentation or run a crucial meeting and your muscles are cold and tight, it will reflect in your posture and presentation. Make sure you give yourself plenty of time to stretch your muscles to get them warm and used to moving. Stretch your arms, legs, back, and neck. With relaxed muscles your presentation will come across smoother and more relaxed. You should also give your voice plenty of chance to warm itself up before you start.

3: Fuel yourself

Have you ever been in a meeting or interview and had your stomach growl so loudly that everyone in the room heard it? You may think this would be a fun moment where everyone will get a chuckle. It's not. It's

unprofessional. Make sure you eat before you present your material. But don't overdo it. What is worse than a gurgling stomach is a noisy backside or the need to break for Mother Nature. Sure, you can include time in your presentation for bathroom/stretch breaks. But if you are in an interview and that stomach makes itself known, it will look less-than-professional. And fuel is not just about quieting an other-wise noisy digestive system. You also need plenty of fuel to get you through the process. If you don't take in enough calories, your body will let you know — which will not go unnoticed.

4: Choose your props carefully

I have seen presentations that looked horribly amateur simply because the speaker was carrying a McDonald's coffee cup as he spoke or a whiteboard or easel that didn't work. When putting together the pieces for your presentation, don't leave out any details. If you need a drink (and you should have water with you), make sure your water glass (and pitcher, if you drink a lot) is clean, simple, and classy. Do not use a sippy cup or sports water bottle. If your presentation requires an easel or whiteboard, be sure that everything is solid, works as it should, and looks new or at least clean and sturdy.

If you depend upon handouts for your presentation, make sure they're in collated, pre-stapled, and stacked neatly or distributed to each audience member's chair. The less you have to interrupt your presentation or meeting to get everything in order, the better. And don't skimp. If you shell out for a cheap easel or whiteboard, you might find yourself fighting with them more than you should. Pay for solid tools and you will get solid results.

5: Spell check

It amazes me when I am a participant in a lecture, interview, presentation, or meeting and I see spelling errors in handouts or resumes or on a whiteboard or overhead. The fastest way to lose attention or a job prospect is to have spelling errors littered throughout your work. An audience or interviewer may forgive minor or tricky sentence structure issues, but spelling? No way. If you don't employ spell check in your word processor — do. If you know you're plagued with spelling problems, have someone check your presentations, resume, or handouts.

6: Turn your phone on silent mode

Your audience doesn't need to know how many people call or text you, and there is nothing more unprofessional than stopping your presentation or interrupting your interview to answer a phone or a text. There are few exceptions to this rule. If your wife is about to give birth, that's one of the few. If that is the case (or if there is another, equally pressing need), explain the situation to your audience so they understand. Outside of extenuating circumstances, set the phone on silent or turn it off.

7: Watch your time

Remember that time is money. Not only are people paying you for your services, but your audience members have their own work to do. Stick to the allotted timeframe and you will always come out on top. And that doesn't mean end early. When a company pays for your time, it wants to get its money's worth. Don't shortchange it. And if you're in an interview, do NOT act as though you have something more important to do. You don't. The single most important thing you have going on is that interview. This also includes being on time. As a good rule of thumb, you should be prepared to GO at the slotted time. This does not mean you should ARRIVE at your starting time. Show respect by arriving early so you can be prepared to go on time.

8: Be prepared

This really holds true if you're using a laptop to run a presentation through a projector. Do not depend upon your host for anything (outside of the projector). Bring any possible connector you will need as well as a spare battery and your AC adapter for your laptop. You do not want to have your host scrambling around to find something to help you get your presentation off the ground.

Preparedness also includes making sure you have enough literature for your audience. Always bring more than you need. Find out ahead of time how many attendees are expected so you can make sure you bring more than enough supplies. And bring extra digital copies of your presentation. You never know whether, for some reason, the presentation will wind up corrupt on your PC. Bring your presentation on a CD and a flash drive just to be safe.

9: Know your audience

Do you remember some of the advice you were given in school about writing cover letters for your resume? Did you ever start a cover letter with "To whom it may concern..."? I didn't think so. So why would you begin a presentation without knowing your audience? This can be crucial to delivering a professional presentation or meeting. If you're giving a network presentation to a group of UNIX or Linux administrators, don't speak in Windows terms. If you're in front of a group of Windows administrators, don't insult them by bragging about how strong your UNIX kung fu is.

10: Don't be a comic

A little humor will go a long way to help connect to your audience. But don't use the event as a vehicle for your standup routine. You will look less like a professional and more like a clown. Sure, break the ice with a funny anecdote or relax the situation when too much information is offered at once. But you don't want to present yourself as a jokester or a comedian. You won't be taken seriously when serious is called for. And you're probably not as funny as you think you are. So leave the comedy to the professionals.

Other tips?

These simple tips can help you come across more professionally when giving presentations, running important meetings, or being interviewed. What other advice would you offer fellow TechRepublic members who want to present themselves more professionally?

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