

A good first impression

Recently, I was sitting in some airport — I think it was in Minneapolis/St. Paul on my way to Boise, Idaho — when I spotted an article in USA Today about young people and their quest to make the right impression on their very first job interview. The article described how many young people don't know the dos and don'ts of dressing for success in today's business world and, as a result, fail to secure coveted jobs — some over and over again. Their skills and abilities are top notch, but somehow the call never comes with the words "you've got the job" as the opening line.



As I see it

Peg Demarco

It got me thinking about my first job interview way back in September of 1965. I had graduated high school in June, taken the Civil Service test for stenographer and had received a certified letter asking me to report to the Town Hall in the Town of Smithtown, one of the largest and prominent towns on Long Island in New York. My interview was with the supervisor of the town, equivalent to a town mayor, and while I was jumping for joy at the prospect of a full-time job, my insides turned to mush in anticipation of the dreaded and stressful interview process.

Taking a bus to get there on time, I first met with the supervisor's aide, a very nice woman who led me into an inner office where a handsome, young man sat behind a desk. He shook my hand and introduced himself, asked me a few general questions, and proceeded to dictate a complicated letter filled with all sorts of legal mumbo jumbo.

During the process, I, of course, began to sweat and a large bead of sweat began to form on my forehead. During a lull in dictation, I brushed the sweat away, but I forgot about the heavy dark black eyeliner that we gals used to wear during those prehistoric times. Needless to say, a glob of black eyeliner found its way from my eyelid to my cheek and down to my chin. The supervisor looked over at me, but never missed a beat of his letter. To this day, I swear I saw him smile.

When I found my way back to his aide, she handed me a tissue. I was mortified, but struggled to transcribe the notes I had taken a few minutes earlier. Somehow, through some mystery, I landed the job and worked for the young supervisor off and on for 13 years as he made his way up to county executive. Of course, my father helped out slightly when he called a committeeman that I babysat for and asked him to pull a few strings, but I like to think that my perfect stenography might have nailed the job and the yearly salary of \$3,280 that I had secured.

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During my close to 40 years in the business world, and with 10 years in human resources where I participated in interviewing hundreds of nervous job applicants, there is one rule that never seemed to waver in the interview process: an interviewer will know within the first 10 minutes whether he or she will truly consider you for the job. That's why the first impression is so vital. Yes, skills, abilities, education, experience and everything else on your resume is important, but the first impression is usually what the interviewer will remember most about you — so it's got to be good.

"Business casual" has turned everything upside down as far as corporate dress these days because every company adopts their own style and their own interpretation of what is meant by "casual."

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However, when it comes to the job interview, following the trend just doesn't cut it. So what does one wear to an interview?

Nothing, but nothing, makes a good first impression than a Navy blue suit — for both young men and women. It doesn't have to be a Nicole Miller original or a Pierre Cardin — Sears has perfectly good suits for a third of the price or you might even consider looking into a consignment shop.

Now, I know a few of you are groaning out there thinking I've lost touch with reality. The last place you want to be caught is in a consignment shop.

When I first moved down to North Carolina about 15 years ago, I landed a job working for two dynamic, powerful women with high positions in a billion dollar company in Charlotte. Both women dressed to perfection, and I continually marveled (and picked up a few pointers along the way) at how they could "get it all together" and accessorize as if they continually shopped on Fifth Avenue. One day, they invited me out to lunch with them and lo and behold, we spent the entire 60 minutes dashing from one consignment shop to another. Yes, both women had picked up plenty of outfits and accessories at consignment shops, so check them out for potential bargains.

As far as jewelry for both men and women, a watch and one ring is perfect. No big hoop earrings for ladies, rings on every finger, thick gold chains, ankle bracelets or anything else that would be more appropriate in a nightclub. Keep it simple, gals — pearl stud earrings are classy.

Hair — it's a woman's crowning glory, but it can also be her immediate downfall if it is teased too high, every color of the rainbow, stringy and dirty, spiked like a porcupine, or unmanageable with curls flying in all directions. Makeup should be kept simple — leave off the green and blue eye shadow and save the tango mango orange lipstick or the really red nail polish for a night on the town.

Gents make the razor your best friend and get a good haircut a day or so before your interview — but use a barber or a hairdresser that you've been to before so you know it will be done right.

And last, but not least, and very important, is one piece of advice from a top recruiting firm in New York. A sure fire way to get rejected for a job is to wear heavy perfume or aftershave. But how much is heavy? Since no one knows for sure, the logical thing to do is to not wear any at all. Deodorant and a light spritz of hairspray is fine, but don't be tempted to dab a little bit of White Diamonds or Obsession on your neck ladies or splash a little bit of Polo on your cheeks gents — it may cost you the job!