Image, Style and Body Language: Perception Matters!

When it comes to building your value in a civilian workplace, the power of perception is directly tied to how you appear and how you behave

May 15, 2017

Developed through the VFW's collaboration with Lida Citroën of the international brand strategy firm LIDA360, this article is part of the VFW's expanding education and transitioning services, resources and webinars designed to provide service members and veterans transitioning to the civilian workforce with an opportunity to learn about personal branding and strategies for navigating the job search process. To learn more about Lida's commitment to the veteran community, check out her recent TEDX talk.

By Lida Citroën, CEO, LIDA360

You've heard it before: *What you see is what you get.* In building a civilian career, however, the phrase should read: *What you see is what you **believe** you will get.* Perception is the way we understand, or interpret something, and when it comes to building your value in a civilian workplace, the power of perception is directly tied to how you appear and how you behave.

Is it fair that we judge people's value in part by how they appear and act? Probably not. But it is a human trait to make quick assessments of someone based on what we see. In an instant, we decide: Can I trust this person? Do I want to get to know them better? Will he/she fit into my company culture?

Instead of fighting whether perception is fair or justified, take advantage of the tools you have available to positively influence and impact the way you are perceived.

Image and Style

A common aspect of the military-to-civilian transition veterans are excited about is the ability to choose what they will wear. Similarly, one of the things veterans say stresses them about the civilian workplace is not knowing what to wear.

As you consider how you want people to perceive you, begin by answering these questions first:

1. What industry or job am I in or pursuing?
2. Is there a dress code in that industry?
3. Who is my target audience (Whose attention do I seek)?
4. How do I want them to perceive me?

The Job Interview

The job interview is a formal event. To show respect for the process and the interviewer, you dress up. It's been said that you should "dress for the job you want," when interviewing and striving for advancement. Management wants to visualize what you would look like in the role. Appearing too casual or inconsistent with the dress code of the company and the job you are pursuing could make it difficult for managers to envision you serving in that role.

Research the company in advance to see how employees and managers dress there. Also, certain industries are more formal in dress code (e.g., financial services firms), while others are classically more casual (e.g. advertising firms, warehouse and distribution centers, technology firms). While there are no dress code rule books across industries, you gain insight by reviewing their website and other online platforms to get a sense of how their employees dress for work.

To make a positive impression on the interviewer, set yourself up for success, and feel most confident, stick to these guidelines:

1. **Understand the dress code of the company** – Do your homework before the interview. Ask people who work there what the dress code is. Look at the manager's profiles online: Do they all dress similarly? Are they wearing suits or t-shirts?

2. **Be comfortable** – The job interview is not the day to try out a new look. You should wear something that is appropriate, but also comfortable. Dressing in comfortable clothing means you'll avoid pulling at your collar or pants because they are too tight or riding up. Look for fabrics that have a bit of stretch if this is your first experience wearing business clothes.

3. **Avoid distractions** – Women, be wary of big jewelry (earrings, necklaces or rings) that could distract the interviewer. Things that make noise (clank, jingle or chime) or pieces that move as you do (for example, big, dangly earrings) detract from you.

   Men, avoid wearing too many distinct pieces. For instance, choosing to wear a checked suit with a striped tie, significant tie pin, pocket square and brightly checked socks can overwhelm the interviewer.

4. **Be authentic** – Be sure you feel like yourself in what you're wearing. If you hate the idea of wearing a business suit to work every day, be careful interviewing for a job where that will be protocol. To feel like yourself means you are comfortable, confident, expressive and genuine in your style. Wardrobe is a big part of how satisfied we are in our work.

Whether you're going in for a job interview, or meeting someone for coffee to network, your image represents how much you respect yourself and others, and is an opportunity to present yourself as polished and confident. Consider the intent of the meeting, location, other person's industry and company, and how you want to be perceived.

Body Language

For many of the job interviews and important meetings you will attend as you transition from the military, remember some employers want to meet you and evaluate your abilities

and character to see if you're worth investing. It is common for hiring managers to want to "take a chance on you" because they feel you are a good investment, not because you possess all the skills and experience they need for the position. The way you carry yourself – with confidence or insecurity, professionally or casually, with respect or disrespect – says a lot about who you are and what they will believe about you.

Your body language reveals a great deal about your motivation, trustworthiness and confidence. Research indicates that more than 90% of information received is based on vocal tonality and body language, and about 10% is the words you say. If you ignore how you say something and only focus on what you say, you miss 90% of the possible impact of the message.

Body language to pay attention to:

1. **Eye contact** – When you talk to someone, look them in the eyes. Otherwise it comes across as being arrogant, untrustworthy, disingenuous or standoffish. *Looking people in the eyes when you speak to them makes them feel validated and seen (literally).*

2. **Handshake** – Gripping someone's hands in a bone-crushing fashion implies over aggressiveness, insecurity, and power. Shaking hands with what feels like a wet, limp fish communicates a lack of confidence and fear. *Your handshake should be friendly and assertive, not weak and unsure.*

3. **Head motion** – Nodding aggressively when someone is talking to you indicates you are impatient and want him or her to finish speaking quickly. Shaking your head side-to-side when saying "yes" indicates disagreement and contradicts what your words are saying. *Your head motions should be consistent with your words. When you agree, nod your head up and down.*

4. **Hand gestures** – Fiddling with jewelry or keys suggests you might be anxious or unsure, projecting a lack of confidence in your words. If you touch other people too much when you talk to them you could be infringing on their personal space, making them feel uncomfortable and even threatened. Too much physical contact in a professional setting can communicate neediness or an overly assertive personality. *It is fine to touch someone's arm or shoulder if the conversation fits the gesture. Be responsive if they are uncomfortable with the move, and resist touching them again as you build your conversation.*

5. **Posture** – Sitting or standing too erect and "at attention" can make the other person feel uncomfortable. It projects a formality that is appropriate in the military but not as much in civilian life. *Put your body weight on both feet, equally, and relax your shoulders and hands. This indicates you are approachable.*

6. **Tonality** – End sentences down. When nervous, your vocal chords tighten up and this can cause you to speak in a higher pitch than normal. This tone sounds insecure and hesitant and is hard to control. However, the way you end your sentences is controllable! If you end every sentence with an up tone, it sounds like you're asking a question. Instead, end your sentences in a more definitive tone, making you sound declarative and confident.

7. **Responsiveness** – When asked a question — whether you have a prepared response or not — answer quickly. It is completely appropriate to take a few seconds to consider your response, but not to take 90 seconds to form a reply. Also, focus your answer to address the question asked. Try not to give responses that are off topic or vague.

Your image, style and body language can create the belief that you are professional, collaborative and confident — all desired qualities by employers. People who are perceived as confident as seen as more successful, interesting and attractive. Employers, investors and colleagues seek to work with individuals who have a good sense of who they are and what they can offer, yet are humble enough to learn and grow.