

Focus Less on the Impression You're Making on Others – and More on the Impression You're Making on Yourself!

- Published on May 8, 2020



[Amy Cuddy Influencer](#)

Social Psychologist, Bestselling Author, International Keynote Speaker

[10 articles](#) [Amy Cuddy](#)

Whether you're giving a talk, pitching an idea, or interviewing for a job, how do classic "impression management" tactics influence the outcome? Take a look at what the science tells us -- and how you might change your approach to managing impressions during high-stakes presentations.

(Adapted from my book [Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges](#))

Venture capitalists are especially fascinating on the subject of how presence looks and sounds. They must swiftly decide whether an idea and, more importantly, its owner are investment worthy. So what are successful venture capitalists looking for? If they're comparing multiple good business proposals, which tiny cues tilt them away from one entrepreneur seeking funding toward another?

Of the many observations I've collected from successful venture capitalists over the years, one of the most common is this:

"They're trying too hard to make a good impression on me when they should be showing me how much they care about this idea that they're pitching."

When we are trying to manage the impression we're making on others, we're choreographing ourselves in an unnatural way. This is hard work, and we don't have the cognitive and emotional bandwidth to do it well. The result is that we come across as inauthentic.

Nonetheless, many people attempt to manage the impression they're making on others by scripting and choreographing the content of their verbal and nonverbal communication. This approach assumes we have quite a bit more control over any given situation than we actually do. But does impression management work?

Science has tried to answer this question, mostly in the context of job interview performance and hiring decisions. For example, people might try to enforce a positive image of themselves on interviewers by pouncing on every opportunity to recite a story about their accomplishments or by smiling and making frequent eye contact. The net return on these impression-management approaches is generally poor, especially in long or structured interviews and with well-trained interviewers. The harder candidates work to manage the impression they make—the more tactics they deploy—the more the interviewers start to see the candidates as insincere and manipulative, which ultimately bodes poorly for landing the job.

But this doesn't just apply to the person who's there to be judged. Keep in mind that in all interactions, both parties are judging and both are being judged. In job interviews, most of us think of the candidate as the one who's being evaluated, but candidates are also taking the measure of their interviewers. This is partly because we automatically form an impression of every person with whom we interact. But there's also a practical reason: the interviewer represents the organization, so the candidate studies her or him, searching for usable information.

As a result, interviewers often “sell” themselves and their organization in an effort to adapt to what they think candidates want to hear. In a recent study, Jennifer Carson Marr and Dan Cable wanted to know whether interviewers' desire to make themselves and their companies attractive to job candidates—as opposed to the need to accurately evaluate and hire candidates—would affect the quality of their evaluations and selections. In a combination of lab and field studies, they found that the more interviewers the interviewers were focused on attracting candidates, the less accurate they were at selecting candidates who would do well after being hired, in terms of performance, good citizenship, and core-values fit.^[ii]

The lesson is clear: focus less on the impression you're making on others and more on the impression you're making on yourself. The latter serves the former, because if you don't believe in yourself, how can you expect anyone else to believe in you?

^[i] If you'd like to know more about the way impression-management techniques affect job interview outcomes, see Barrick, M. R., Shaffer, J. A., & DeGrassi, S. W. (2009). What you see may not be what you get: Relationships among self-presentation tactics and ratings of interview and job performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 94, 1394–1411; Tsai, W. C., Chen, C. C., & Chiu, S. F. (2005). Exploring boundaries of the effects of applicant impression management tactics in job interviews. *Journal of Management*, 31, 108–125; Gilmore, D. C., & Ferris, G. R. (1989). The effects of applicant impression management tactics on interviewer judgments. *Journal of Management*, 15, 557–564; Stevens, C. K., & Kristof, A. L. (1995). Making the right impression: A field study of applicant impression management during job interviews. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 80, 587–606; Howard, J. L., & Ferris, G. R. (1996). The employment interview context: Social and situational influences on interviewer decisions. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 26, 112–136; Baron, R. A. (1986). Self-presentation in job interviews: When there can be “too much of a good thing.” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 16, 16–28; Baron, R. A. (1989). Impression management by applicants during employment interviews: The “too much of a good thing effect.” In R. W. Eder & G. R. Ferris (Eds.), *The employment interview: Theory, research, and practice*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

^[ii] Marr, J. C., & Cable, D. M. (2014). Do interviewers sell themselves short? The effects of selling orientation on interviewers' judgments. *Academy of Management Journal*, 57, 624–651.