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# How to make a great first impression

Meeting new people can be intimidating, but there are 10 rules that will help you make a great first impression. For example, greet someone with a handshake – it may seem old-school, but you can't go wrong with it.

By Mikey Rox, Wise Bread | JUNE 12, 2015



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Clammy hands, heart racing, stomach turning... it all can only mean one thing: You're about to meet some new people.

But don't fret (or at least, fret less), because we're here with 10 rules that will help you feel confident you're not making any huge *faux pas* (<http://www.wisebread.com/3-supposed-etiquette-faux-pas-that-actually-make-you-look-good>). Who knows, you might even start *enjoying* this whole social interaction thing!

## 1. Start With an Icebreaker — But Not Something Cliché

You've got to start the conversation somewhere, but it's best to avoid tired old lines like "What do you do?" and "Where are you from?" over and over again. If you really want to stand out from the crowd, take a different approach and ask something unexpected.

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"No one wants to have the same conversation 1,000 times," says John Paul Engel, an executive recruiter that serves high-growth companies. "Don't ask them where they are from or what they do; that's boring. Ask them about something distinctive they are wearing. Ask them what they think about an idea. Just make it different."

## 2. Greet With a Handshake — And Nothing Else

I've heard plenty of people say that shaking hands is passé (although, these are some of the same people who wear flowers in their beards, so there's that...), but many business pros still stand by this standard *American* way of greeting a new acquaintance. Reasonably, it should be the *only* way you should greet someone new (unless the individual prefers no body contact at all; in that case, take their lead) — no matter what anybody says otherwise.

"Never hug or air-kiss business colleagues you're meeting for the first time," advises April Masini, relationship expert and author of the Ask April advice column. "A handshake — while seemingly formal and old school for many in casual climates and youthful businesses — is still best. In fact, it's always best to err on the side of the conservative when touching is involved."



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## 3. Avoid Cultural Faux Pas With Advance Research

I emphasized above that handshakes are an American way of greeting people, because they are — or at least commonplace mostly to Western society. Other cultures don't shake hands, but rather employ different means of greeting one another. In these situations, not only do you want to ensure that you're greeting them properly, but also that you're not outwardly offending them with a gesture that may mean something entirely different in their culture.

## 4. Address the Person Formally at First

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Personally I like to be called by my nickname (Mikey), while my birth name and middle name are reserved for my family. But not everyone is like that. Some folks prefer to keep it super formal, going so far to have you call them Mr. or Mrs. So-and-so. It's kind of obnoxious (especially if the person is around your own age), but it's their prerogative. I don't like to be called anything other than what I deem acceptable, so I give everyone else the respect they deserve in this regard too.

## 5. Remember the Person's Name Any Way You Know How

I have a very hard time remembering the name of someone I meet for the first time. The person will tell me and immediately it leaves my head as if I never heard it in the first place. That probably says more about my listening skills than anything else, but I know I'm not alone. If you have a similar problem, consciously employ whatever tactic you need to make the name stick — mnemonic devices, rhymes, word association, repetition — so you don't have to create an awkward situation after a great 10-minute conversation by asking for the person's name again.

Or just do what I do and tell the person up front that you have a hard time remembering names so you have to say it out loud several times to make it stick. Most people can relate, so it's not as weird as it may seem.

## 6. Assume an Active Listening Role

As I mentioned above, my inability to remember a person's name upon meeting them is likely because I don't really listen to what they're saying but merely hear them. There's a big distinction, as *White Men Can't Jump* pointed out 23 years ago. This isn't a skill you can easily adopt (or you would have by now). Rather, listening is a skill (<http://www.wisebread.com/25-ways-to-communicate-better-today>) that needs to be learned.

## 7. Avoid One-Word Responses

I rarely say the word "huh" anymore to convey to someone that I missed what they said or that I don't understand something. I'm conscious of this one word specifically because a Canadian friend of mine called me out for it a few years ago, saying that he could always tell who was American versus Canadian because Americans tend to sound like geese when having conversation.

Think about that for a second.

But "huh" isn't the only one-word response you should avoid. When meeting someone for the first time, it's important to let the other half know that you're interested in what they're saying by engaging wholeheartedly.

"Particularly for introverts, when asked closed ended questions, he or she typically gives a one-word response," says Parker Geiger, CEO of an image and brand development group. "For example, if one was asked how they are, typically an introvert will say fine or okay. Instead, say, 'I am fine. How are you?' This will allow for longer engagements. Extroverts can do this as well when they do not seem interested to avoid making someone feel dismissed."

## 8. Take Mental Notes Then Jot Them Down

I always appreciate the little things that someone remembers about me that even I've perhaps forgotten about. If you want to be this kind of thoughtful acquaintance who will absolutely make a good and lasting impression, make it a habit to take mental notes during your conversation and jot them down on your phone afterward for later use.

## 9. Have Your Business Card on Hand

Another area I need to work on personally is always having business cards on hand. As a small business owner, I rely heavily on in-person relations and referrals, but I sometimes don't have my cards with me because I tend to carry different accessories to different functions or I've forgotten to replenish the stock in my bags. Social media follow-up helps avoid missed opportunities, but it's not always foolproof. When receiving a business card, be sure to take a second to look at it opposed to putting it directly into your pocket. The latter can be viewed by the card provider as lack of interest, which doesn't help you in any way.

## 10. Follow Up Briefly Via E-mail or Social Media

Most of us meet many people everyday, and it's hard to remember all of them. If you want to stand out in the crowd, sending a follow-up message is a critical part to relationship building. Personally I prefer email, but social media is a relevant form of follow-up now — though you should get a sense of what a particular person prefers first; you can usually tell in a conversation whether one is well-connected or not. Use some of the tips from earlier in your follow-up, like mentioning something personal that you

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remember from the conversation. That will help solidify your status as a contact who is an active listener, thoughtful, professional, and someone who appreciates the value of meeting someone new.

I also would advise you to take the follow-up one step further if the person with whom you're following up is a potential employer. I've only been on a few job interviews in my life and I've landed the position every time, and I think that's in part because I've made it a rule to send a thank-you card in the mail immediately following the interview. I don't know if that's what put me ahead of other candidates, but it certainly doesn't hurt my case to let the potential employer know that I'm serious about the position while showing a bit of my character at the same time. In this day and age of Twitter this and Insta that, a hard piece of mail with your handwritten thank-you note and signature goes much further than it would have just 10 years ago. Perhaps we appreciate it more now that it's so rare.

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