

Projecting a Positive Professional Image as a Trainer

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Make a positive impression

You obviously play a central role in the success or failure of your learning event. It is up to you to think of everything that is needed, content to be covered, and format to follow. Learners will show up assuming that you have done all this. If you do not accomplish these tasks effectively, you and the workshop will fail and attendees will lose an opportunity to gain important knowledge, skills and attitude.

Be Prepared

The easiest way to lose the respect of a group of learners is to appear unprepared. Until you show up and open your mouth, learners likely view you as a professional. Once you step in front of the group, you have to show that you are worthy of that respect.

Through proper planning and execution of scheduled activities, having necessary supplies, equipment, materials, and other essential items, you say non-verbally, "I am ready to help you learn." Do not take anything for granted. Create a detailed plan, practice until you are thoroughly familiar with content and check and double-check everything before learners arrive. By doing these things, you ensure a more positive learning event for everyone.

Dress Professionally

The way that you dress can affect your level of learner acceptance. Deciding what to wear in your session can sometimes be difficult. When deciding how to dress, a good strategy is to choose clothing that is equal to or "one step above" the type that you anticipate learners will wear. For example, if attendees are executives who will wear suits or skirt and jacket combinations, you should dress likewise. Keep in mind that a conservative clothing style, quality and color is normally a good choice as opposed to selecting items that will stand out or be out of place with your group. Just make sure that whatever you wear is clean, well pressed and maintained and looks professional.

"Business casual" is common in organizations today, yet that phrase has so many different meanings to people that you may be unsure what it means. If you are presenting to a group within an organization, the simplest way to determine what to wear is to contact the HR or training representative or a sponsor and ask how employees typically come dressed for work, then take your clothing style to the next level. For example, if you are a man and male employees normally wear business slacks and button down collar dress shirts, do likewise and add a tie and sport coat. You can remove these once you start if desired and it seems appropriate. If you are a woman and female employees normally wear a skirt and a nice blouse, you might wear a professional looking suit or dress. If employees wear jeans or informal clothing, you may want to wear a nicely pressed pair of khaki slacks and professional looking shirt/blouse and possibly a light jacket or sport coat, which you can remove. No matter what your gender, if you are speaking to a professional conference group, it is best to wear a conservative dark colored business suit since you are likely to have all manner of dress present in the audience. A suit normally portrays an image of success, professionalism and expertise to any group.

Another thing to remember is that you can always “dress down” once in class by inviting learners to get comfortable and remove their jackets and ties if they prefer so that they can relax and focus better. As you make your introductory session remarks, take off your jacket.

Part of your clothing consideration should be the color of what you wear. For executive type functions such as senior management strategic planning meetings, go with a more traditional and conservative black or navy blue color suit matched with muted-color conservative accessories. When conducting a workshop to lower level attendees or in a non-business setting, you can likely get away with more business casual clothing with pastels shirts or blouses. The key is to fit in with your group. That means recognizing different styles of dress that are appropriate for the session content and geographic area in which you are delivering the training. For example, an expensive suit might not be appropriate for a group of high school students or for teaching a class on computer software. Likewise, cowboy boots would not likely go well at a training event on Wall Street in New York.

Demonstrate a Positive Attitude and Enthusiasm

You expect and appreciate a positive attitude from your learners and they should be able to do the same with you. A positive attitude and enthusiasm comes from loving what you do and enjoying the topic(s) that you teach. If this is not true about you then maybe you should seek another profession. You affect the learning, and in some situations, the lives of your learners. Your failure to come prepared to a workshop or to come with less than a “can do” attitude is unprofessional and deceitful. We all have down days when things do not go the way we would hope or planned. However, when you step in front of a group of trainees your issues are unimportant and should not detract from your mission. Do the best possible job that you can and try to instill a feeling of excitement and anticipation in your learners that lasts throughout the workshop.

Be Confident; Not Cocky

In the past, you may have experienced trainers, presenters, educators or others in a learning environment who demonstrated a powerful “me” attitude. Their sentences often start with “I” and they do a LOT of the talking throughout a learning event. In the end, you know quite a bit about the trainer and what they do and believe, but not as much as you would like about the session topic. The point is that most learners really do not care about you, your accomplishments, your political, religious and personal views, or your opinion on a variety of non-workshop related topics. What they DO care about is what you know and can share with them related to the session topic. They also want to know how you can help them improve personally and professionally, advance in their profession, and make more money. Stick to the task at hand when conducting a workshop. Real-world examples are often helpful in clarifying key points and appreciated by learners. Stories about your own experiences and issues that have nothing to do with the topic and wastes time are not.

The key difference between a trainer who has confidence, and one who is cocky or consumed with him or herself, is that the previous walks the talk and can back it up without doing a lot of self-aggrandizing. The latter type of trainer often focuses on him-or herself and fails to worry about whether learners gain from the session.

Confident trainers prepare, plan, rehearse, and have plenty of backup material in case of

contingencies. When it comes time to deliver workshop content the confident trainer will arrive early, feel comfortable about what will follow, greet learners in a personable fashion and immediately begin to build rapport with them. Throughout the event, this trainer will perform professionally and without arrogance, will listen to and appropriately answer learner questions, and will end the session on a high note and on time.

Admit When You Make a Mistake

One last thing to remember related to professional image is that learners do not expect you to be perfect, but they do expect you to be truthful and have integrity. Both of these impact trust. As a trainer, you are under continual observation and evaluation in the classroom. Whatever you do and say can affect the ultimate outcome of your workshop. Related to that, if someone in the room can discount and show something you show, say or present to be wrong, based on their knowledge or expertise, it can tarnish your effectiveness. For that reason, if you make a mistake or realize that you are wrong about something, quickly acknowledge it and recover.

Depending on the severity of a mistake, you can sometimes use humor to get past it. For example, if a learner points out a spelling error that you made when writing something on a flip chart, or you realize it yourself, you could light-heartedly say something like, "I'm sorry. It's these cheap markers I am using; they don't have spell check on them," and then correct the error and move on. When errors that are more serious occur, such as giving misinformation, apologize, admit that you made an error, correct the information or situation and then move on without dwelling on the issue. Your learners are likely to respect you for taking ownership of the issue, as long as you do not make an ongoing series of such mistakes or errors. Multiple mistakes can destroy your credibility. You can avoid this problem by doing your "homework," thoroughly researching your topic and preparing in advance to deliver it.

Bob Lucas B.S., M.A., M.A, CPLP is an internationally-known author and learning and performance professional. He has written and contributed to thirty-one books and compilations. He regularly conducts creative training, train-the-trainer, customer service, interpersonal communication and management and supervisory skills workshops. Bob can be reached at blucas@robertwlucas.com or through his website www.robertwlucas.com. Follow his blog at www.robertwlucas.com/wordpress and like him at www.facebook.com/robertwlucasenterprises