

Don't just talk like a lawyer — look like one



by [Stephen E. Seckler](#) and Aria Vaida

The two cornerstones of selling legal services are building your reputation (marketing) and cultivating business relationships (business development). Taken together, they ensure that prospective clients and referral sources know you, trust you and believe that you are the right lawyer to solve their problem. In the broadest sense, that is the message that you want to communicate to the world.

Having the “right” message is an exercise in wordsmithing, but communication is not all about the words themselves. It’s not enough to write and sound like a lawyer; you need to look like one, too.

There are a number of considerations in projecting the “right” image. As a lawyer, you want to project to the world that you are professional and trustworthy. So how do you ensure that your verbal or written message is matched by your appearance?

Body language

There is a lot that we communicate through body language. Within seconds, most people make a series of judgments about our intelligence, socioeconomic status and trustworthiness based on our appearance. Since that may very well occur before you even open your mouth, it is important to carry yourself as someone who is confident, trustworthy and welcoming.

The most important way you can accomplish this is by making good eye contact. Looking away when you are speaking to someone is a sign that you are not interested. If you enter a room for a meeting, set your BlackBerry to silent so that you will not be tempted to glance down. As you meet individuals in a networking function, do not allow your eyes to stray.

Stand tall and maintain an open body position when you enter a room. A firm (but not bone-crushing) handshake is the appropriate greeting for both men and women. Smiling (when appropriate) is another important way to communicate genuine interest, project confidence and draw someone into a conversation.

Avoid fidgeting, or moving around in general. While open gestures reinforce that you have nothing to hide, tapping your pen, touching your face and shuffling from side to side can convey nervousness, lack of confidence and even lack of trustworthiness.

Dress for success

As a lawyer, your clothing should be tidy and conservative. While women have more latitude in getting beyond the basic business suit, flashy dressing (i.e., very bright colors and intricate patterns) does not support the conservative image that most people expect from their lawyer.

This, of course, depends upon the situation and the clients you serve. In court, a fairly conservative business suit, either black or some other dark color, is appropriate. If you are meeting clients who run a start-up technology company, however, you have more latitude — though make sure not to dress like a software engineer who works from home.

If dressing well is not your thing, then take your cues from some of the more successful lawyers in your firm. Notice the way that they dress. If you have a hard time making decisions about clothing, get a recommendation for a store that has good sales help. Make sure the store has a tailor on hand, so that you can be sure you are getting the right fit.

There are a number of general rules of dress that you should follow:

- Your clothing should be wrinkle free. Find a dry cleaner or buy a steamer if necessary.
- In general, a man's belt color should match his shoe color, and his sock color should match his suit color.
- If you wear pinstripes, make sure they are small.
- Both men and women should wear a minimal amount of jewelry.
- Women should apply makeup conservatively. Skirts should reach to or below the knee. You want partners and clients to focus on the quality of your work, not your other assets.
- Learn about color. Red is generally a power color and a good choice for ties. Maroon and burgundy connote leadership, courage and credibility, while basic red communicates more sensitivity.
- It is a fact of life: At some point, we might gain or lose weight. Do not let your clothes suffer. A little money spent on alterations can make a big difference.

Get help

If you are unsure about your body language and appearance, get help from someone. One suggestion is to join Toastmasters, a nonprofit that develops public speaking and leadership skills. It's a very low-cost and effective way to get feedback on your presentation skills. Try taking video of yourself as well. This can help you evaluate your own appearance.

Looks aren't everything, either in the law or in life. But a first impression is an important part of the package. Ignore your appearance at your own peril.

Stephen E. Seckler is the president of Seckler Legal Coaching. He writes the blog CounseltoCounsel (www.seckler.com/blog/) and can be contacted at legal@seckler.com. Aria Vaida is the marketing director at Bernkopf Goodman in Boston and serves on the board of the local chapter of the Law Firm Media Professionals Group and on the Educational Committee for the Legal Marketing Association.