Chapter 6.14
Impression Formation in Computer–Mediated Communication and Making a Good (Virtual) Impression

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ABSTRACT

In face-to-face interactions, people generally form impressions by focusing on a variety of nonverbal cues. Increasingly, however, people are communicating virtually and forming impressions based on mediated interactions. In an online environment, the range of nonverbal cues that normally aid in impression formation is drastically narrowed. In the absence of these nonverbal cues, forming impressions via computer-mediated communication places a greater emphasis on verbal (text-based) and linguistic cues. This chapter offers strategies to ensure virtual workers make a good impression on their clients and colleagues when interacting online.

INTRODUCTION

As the saying goes, you never get a second chance to make a good first impression. This is especially true when working virtually, where impressions are formed via computer-mediated communication (CMC). As Wallace observes, "Increasingly… the online persona is playing a larger role in first impressions as people rely on email, websites, and discussion forums more for the first contact, and the phone call, letter, or face-to-face meetings less" (1999, p. 14).

The varieties of nonverbal cues that normally aid in impression formation do not exist in an online environment. In the absence of these nonverbal cues, forming impressions via CMC places a greater emphasis on verbal (text-based) and linguistic cues, as well as depending more

upon social cues such as shared schema, context, and stereotypes. Indeed, as Tannis and Postmes observe, "communications over the Internet are all but free from influences of the social, the cognitive, and the physical" (2003, p. 692).

It is critical, then, that people working virtually understand how impressions are formed in an online environment and what types of cues aid in forming those impressions, so virtual workers can manage their own online behavior in such a manner that allows others to form an accurate impression.

BACKGROUND

Impression formation is a significant characteristic of communication and a fundamental social-psychological process (Walther, 1993; Liu, Ginther, & Zelhart, 2002). Asch (1946) and Goffman (1959) are generally associated with the earliest scholarly research into impression formation. Regardless of the nature of an interpersonal interaction, as humans "we seem to exit most of our social encounters with some general impression of the other person's characteristics and dispositions" (Hancock & Dunham, 2001, p. 325). It is simply human nature to form impressions of those around us with whom we communicate in a variety of ways and with differing motivations and goals.

Early scholarship into impression formation emphasized how traditional cues and sources of information identified as important in face-to-face interactions were reduced or eliminated in a CMC environment (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976; Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire, 1984; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). These theories, collectively termed the "cues filtered out" approach (Culnan & Markus, 1987), concluded that a lack of nonverbal cues prevented people from forming impressions in CMC.

However, a growing body of empirical research has since contested the findings of the cues filtered out theories, and instead has shown that people compensate for the lack of nonverbal cues in a variety of ways and do indeed form well-developed impressions in mediated environments (see Sherman, 2001, p. 54). One of the more recent theoretical models that is key to understanding impression formation in CMC is social information processing theory (SIP).

SIP (Walther, 1992) posits that in the absence of nonverbal cues, people adapt. They are motivated to use whatever information they have available in a particular medium to provide cues to assist in impression formation. According to SIP, while certain nonverbal cues are missing in CMC, other cues needed to form impressions are still exchanged during an interaction. Because of the nature of CMC, the process takes more time and impressions are formed over a more extended period than in face-to-face interactions.

IMPRESSION FORMATION CUES IN CMC

As predicted by SIP, human beings rely on specific types of cues inherent in CMC to form impressions. Categories, stereotypes, schemas, cultural background and preconceived biases all influence the formation of impressions. Studies have shown that the impact of these social cues is considerable in impression formation (Tanis & Postmes, 2003). In CMC, the number of social cues is reduced, but that "does not point to a reduction in the social context of the CMC" (Spears & Lea, 1992, p. 324).

Social stereotypes and exemplars are types of metonymic models (models in which one member of a category is used to understand the membership as a whole) that are commonly utilized when forming impressions in an online environment (Jacobson, 1999). A stereotype is a model where a society or culture recognizes characteristics of an individual or group of people as representing an entire category. For example, some athletes often make headlines by engaging in unruly

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