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VIEWPOINT

By Steve McKee

# The Art of First Impressions

People form opinions in a flash. So the trick is to create ads that ingratiate without coming on too strong

Have you heard of the term "speed dating"? It's the latest trend for time-starved singles in major metropolitan areas. A host of new entrepreneurs have risen up to take advantage of the craze, forming companies with descriptive names such as 8 Minute Dating, Hurry Date, and PreDate.

According to PreDate, speed dating "is a fun and efficient way for busy single professionals to meet. You'll meet other people in your age and interest group through a series of face-to-face, six-minute 'predates' in a private area at a local upscale restaurant/bar. Wow...up to 12 face-to-face 'dates' or more in one night!"

Wow indeed. Make a good impression in those first six minutes or the "relationship" is over. That's a lot of pressure. And even six minutes may be too many by a factor of two. According to communications professor Michael Sunnafrank, people tend to draw conclusions about someone within as little as three minutes of having met them. And researchers at Carleton University suggest that it takes as little as 1/20th of a second for people to register likes and dislikes about another person. That's fast.

**SPOT CHECK.** Of course, there can be significant debate about whether or not this is a good thing. We've all drawn conclusions about others based on first impressions that were later proved incorrect. And it's not hard to find stories about people who made impulsive decisions based on "love at first sight" and later regret it. (Perhaps they should have given it more than 1/20th of a second.)

But whether or not someone should act on first impressions doesn't change the fact that first impressions exist -- and they're powerful. And it's just as true in advertising as it is in human relationships.

Julie Roehm, Wal-Mart's ([WMT](#)) new senior vice-president of marketing communications and former Automotive Marketer of the Year at Chrysler, recognizes this. "If I can get you to look at our spot on TV and it can make you smile and feel good about our brand," she says, "I've done my job on television." She understands the role of first impressions.

**HERITAGE AD.** Unfortunately, many advertisers don't. They're like the guy who goes on a speed date and expects to get engaged in six minutes. Not only will it not happen, but by coming on too strong, he'll ruin his chances for even a second date. To put it in business terms, you can't often open and close the sale all in one meeting.

A great marketing plan includes a mix of tactics all designed with a specific purpose in mind. Some approaches are designed simply to make a good first impression, some to provide more information, and some to ask for the order. But the process has to unfold in a time and manner with which the target feels comfortable. Chrysler understood that, at least under Ms. Roehm's tenure.

So does Tiffany ([TIF](#)). Tiffany has been an advertiser in *The New York Times* since the 1920s, and over the years they've come to own a "franchise" 4-inch-by-7-inch position on page three. Sure, they usually feature a product in the ad, but it's more of a tradition than it is a hard sale. Tiffany has an image to uphold, and they do so all the way through the sales process.

**"UNPARALLELED" LOSSES.** Consider the company's Web site. Caroline Naggiar, Tiffany's senior vice-president of marketing, says, "Most Web sites are like the front page of a supermarket tabloid -- 50 things going at once with the bells ringing. Tiffany is not about being fast and expedient -- we're about graceful behavior, and beauty and quality. The site was an enormous exercise in being reserved, in pulling back. We wanted to be an oasis."

There's a time to open the sale, a time to foster relationship, and a time to ask for the order. The best advertisers understand this and don't expect every ad to perform every function. In fact, the best advertisers focus most of their energy on fostering the relationship, believing that prospective customers who like and respect their brands will want to spend their time and money with them. Hmmm. Sounds like a great dating strategy.

Pay attention to the first impressions your ads are making. Don't ask them to do too much. Consider a little subtlety. And by all means take a step back and evaluate the message you're sending.

Don't be like my former brokerage firm, which announced its new name with a brochure boasting "A shorter name, the same unparalleled capabilities." They should have been more careful not to include it in the same envelope as an

account statement showing my portfolio cratering. Those were "unparalleled capabilities" I didn't need.

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