

Take 10 Years Off Your Image

Suggestions on how take 10 years off your image and be perceived as more youthful in the office.

By Stephen Viscusi

How old an impression do you make when you're interviewing? Of course, we all know that an interviewer can just count backwards from the year of graduation printed on your resume. However, here is the truth: Perception is the new reality, like 60 is the new 50. So you need to learn the fine art of being perceived as younger as well as *looking* younger. It's more than just the way you *look*.

Is this fair? Is it even legal? And most importantly, should you give in to such nonsense? I'll put it this way: If you are over 40, you need to read on.

The recession we've all been feeling for months is now official. So now bosses can use that magic "R" word as a blank check to fire almost anyone for any reason. And pay attention, over-40s: The wounded economy is an especially perfect opportunity for higher-ups to fire those senior workers whose high wages and big egos have outlasted their welcome.

For those who are unemployed, you must do whatever it takes to convey to hiring managers that you are employable. What does this mean? No one wants to hire someone who's stuck in the old-fashioned way of thinking that being qualified, working hard and being loyal to a company is enough. Your Princeton degree and enviable references won't get you far if you're that naïve.

So back to the age thing.

While many workers have learned that good looks and a polished appearance go a long way toward success in the workplace, too many of them fail to realize that cultivating the perception of youth and a hip attitude is an equally important part of the equation. It's no secret that we live in an age-obsessed society. Like it or not, "interviewing younger" is the new catchphrase.

"Interviewing younger" and being perceived as more youthful at the office is a vocabulary, a body language and a look. And here's a secret: These rules apply even more when your boss is your age or even older. It's not like you are following these rules to impress a young person. Whatever the age of your boss or interviewer, you need to create a youthful perception about yourself. Otherwise, there's someone else waiting in the wings with quicker computer skills and contemporary pop-culture knowledge who will be all too happy to fill your shoes.

So how do you do it? Here are some of the secrets in my new book, "Bulletproof Your Job" (HarperCollins), use them to remind yourself how to hold onto your job while those around you are losing theirs):

Rule #1: Crest Whitestrips.

Yup, this is a shallow, cosmetic-based tip. But I get so many letters from people who just don't understand that having coffee-stained teeth doesn't do you any favors in the interview department. Stop rolling your eyes; go buy the strips (use the store brand for all I care – I'm not picky); and whiten those teeth. Then smile. Smiling makes you look and feel younger – not bitter, old and unemployed. I don't care if you really are bitter, old and unemployed. It's about perception, remember?

Rule #2: If you are over 40, I want you on Facebook today.

No friends? You already have one: just Facebook me. If you don't know how to join, let your kids show you, or even better, have a young person at work "reverse mentor" you on how it works. Let that same person help you choose your profile picture. Seriously. Read our [coverage on how social networking plays a role in the job search](#).

Rule #3: Know about and frequently use Google and Wikipedia.

Bookmark them on your computer, and set one as your homepage.

Rule #4: Watch an episode of "Family Guy."

Discuss. Repeat.

Rule #5: Peruse your local Apple store.

At least learn the difference between an iPod Classic, iPod Touch and iPod Nano and you're on your way. And buy a set of those identifiable white headphones to keep around, even if you don't have the iPod to go with them. It's all about perception.

Rule #6: Do not disclose your SAT scores.

If for some ungodly reason you still remember your SAT scores, keep them to yourself. Not only does no one care, but the scoring isn't even the same anymore, and you'll just wind up aging yourself.

Rule #7: Don't talk about how you're so addicted to Starbucks.

Or Coffee Bean, or whatever your coffee place of choice is. It seems like this would make you appear younger, but it won't. Starbucks screams "unemployed loser." Besides, you should never walk into an interview with a coffee cup, especially since you just whitened those teeth.

Rule #8: Pick up a copy of "Entertainment Weekly" before an interview.

But for God's sake, don't take it in with you and don't let anyone see you reading it. That said, nothing gets you more up to date on the youthful world of pop culture like an issue of *EW*.

Rule #9: Learn how to text.

Rule #10: Lose the paper.

Young people get their news online - they don't read newspapers. So don't carry one into an interview with you or be seen reading it at the office like someone's mom or dad.

Rule #11: Brush up on sports.

This is easy; you can still get away with talking about Michael Phelps and get credit for this one. Bonus points for knowing who's in the NCAA tournament.

Rule #12: Make eye contact.

Eye contact is so critical to being perceived as young; don't be afraid to use it.

Rule #13: Rarely refer to your children.

Never refer to your grandchildren and never ever your great-grandchildren.

Rule #14: Go to the gym.

Or at least say that you do.

Rule #15: Never talk about the '80s or '90s.

Never use words from "your day." Nothing at work is groovy, dy-no-mite, or tubular. Ever.

Rule #16: Get a TiVo or DVR.

Know how they work.

Rule #17: Practice "sounding young" on the phone.

Take a small survey of how old you sound on the phone, and then practice with a friend sounding younger. (A tip: Talk higher and peppier.) This is critical. In the same vein, make sure your outgoing voicemail message isn't too long or boring. Short and sweet with a positive attitude is all you need.

Rule #18: Dress is very important: always dress age-appropriate.

No 40+ man should be wearing an Abercrombie & Fitch T-shirt. For more tips on updating your look without looking too young, review TheLadders' recent [coverage on losing the frump factor](#).

Rule #19: Give your hairstyle a long, hard look.

No wonder there are so many makeover shows! My advice is to ask an outsider his or her opinion. Someone who loves you won't want to hurt your feelings or may love your look for sentimental or

romantic reasons – but sadly, that won't help you find a job. A bad coloring job spells disaster for both men and women, and let's face it, hair weaves for men rarely work. Men, don't go overboard on finding a new hairstyle – just clip your nose and ear hair and you're on the right track. Ladies, pluck or bleach facial hair.

Rule #20: Skip the cologne and excessive perfume.

And while we're on the subject, wear deodorant. You may laugh, but many people just don't do it.

Okay... Feel any younger, or just berated?

Trust me, I just took 15 years off the way you come across. Yeah, some things I talk about here are cosmetic, but most are not. It's all about perception ... and perception is the new reality.

Stephen Viscusi is the author of "Bulletproof Your Job: 4 Simple Strategies to Ride Out the Rough Times and Come Out On Top at Work" (HarperCollins) and the founder of bulletproofyourresume.com, a resume writing service. You can e-mail him at Stephen@viscusi.com or call him at 212-979-5700.