



Creating a positive image

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The term 'soft skills' is wrong because they're anything but soft: they can make or break business negotiations and relationships. Cynics argue they can't be taught and others that they are merely a hyped 'nice to have.' Well, here's the hard reality. Like it or not, from the moment you're seen or heard, people judge you. Soft skills are not about a hard sell that you hope customers and colleagues will buy into. They are about creating a positive image of yourself that you want others to see, building trust and successfully resolving issues.

Of course, it's one thing knowing about them, but a tougher matter altogether putting them into practice. Most pharmaceutical companies offer a myriad of courses to help you develop your soft skills, but here are some basic rules to get you started.

Listen

You can't listen if you're talking. When listening to other people, you're focusing on them. Listen, learn and understand.

Rapport

Build rapport by sharing experiences and interests. Bombarding someone with information is not communicating with them. Rapport only comes when you exchange information, agendas, motivation and feelings. OK, getting quality time with busy physicians isn't easy but if you can gain early rapport, they're more likely to remember you and be willing to make time to see you next time around. Try to gain good rapport with everyone you meet – you never know when you might need their help in the future.

Adapt

Recognise the way in which others communicate and adapt your style to suit. Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) can be a useful tool here. NLP suggest that people are either

- **auditory** ("I **hear** what you're saying")
- **visual** ("I can't **see** what you mean")
- **kinetic** ("I **feel** I can't understand you")

Of course, people are complex and are often subtle combinations of all three but generally tend to fall into one camp. Find out which and match your replies and questions to make them feel comfortable.

'However high up the career ladder you climb, you're still a human being. If you want respect, then earn it through respecting others, not by lording it over them.'



Information is power

Everyone in business knows something that is useful to someone else. As the medical professional responsible for a specific therapeutic area or project, your colleagues, R & D, Regulatory, Sales, CRAs etc will look to you to help increase their product knowledge and inform them the products fare in the big wide world.

Use your knowledge to help and inform others in a style and language that they can understand - you'll feel better about yourself and others will feel better you.

Best behaviour

Information abuse also applies on a personal level. Let's face it, slagging off people can be deeply satisfying but nobody complains about people who behave in a way that's pleasant or easy to manage. Instead of criticising difficult people, see how you can change your response to them to better manage their impact on you.

However high up the career ladder you climb, you're still a human being. If you want respect, then earn it through respecting other not by lording it over them. If you're in a senior role, you should be able to manage yourself better – not worse – than others.

Of course, you shouldn't let people walk all over you, but don't let someone else's bad behaviour bring out the worst in you.

Customer delight

I'm a keen cook and food lover. But it doesn't matter how outstanding the food is, if staff in a restaurant are surly or indifferent, I won't go back. It's not just about what we do: the way in which we do it matters more. It's not just about what we say, often, it's the which in which we say it.

Dos

- maintain gentle eye contact
- keep an open posture
- enquire with questions
- be patient
- probe and clarify, restate and summarise
- watch for non-verbal signals
- suspend instant judgement

Don'ts

- interrupt
- nit-pick
- ask closed questions
- change the subject
- look away
- check your email, tidy papers, etc
- say "yes but"



Floating people's boat

People don't value routine service – they just take it for granted. Creativity is perceived as going the extra mile: it makes people on the receiving end feel special. Try replacing routine with creative strategies in everyday behaviour. Avoid negativity, prejudices, historical baggage, habits, etc, and replace them with a 'can do' approach, openness to new ideas and a willingness to look outside the box.

And take time to be polite. Saying 'excuse me', 'please' and 'thank you' are essential lubricants of interaction between human beings: it is shorthand for showing respect for other people. Remember this, because self-respect is one of the most fundamental needs of all human beings. Being polite towards others will also help you get things done as quickly and painlessly as possible. If it feels wrong, it is: we all have a conscience and know instinctively whether something is right or wrong. If you are about to do something and you think, even fleetingly, that it might be wrong, pause. An inner voice will always tell you the answer and, if you don't listen to this before you act, then you'll be sure to hear it again afterwards.

Conflict

Conflict can be creative and break down barriers if wisely managed. But, when communication breaks down and human emotions kick in, it's no picnic. Some people avoid confrontation, while others thrive on it. Some get over it quickly, others hurt for days. Well-applied soft skills will not only help you deal with it, but help preserve your integrity and your sanity! Concentrate and listen – don't interrupt! Stay calm and try to see the other person's point of view, unreasonable though it may seem to you, use positive words such as 'we' and 'us' and look for a compromise.

You do a difficult job with determination and resilience. Your colleagues are all part of the pharmaceutical industry you represent, but are only human and sometimes can't help but treat you as hero or villain. Play it straight. Behave according to your conscience, as well as your profession. Go to bed knowing this and you will sleep soundly. And your soft skills will continue to be nurtured.