

Impression Management

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In sociology and social psychology, impression management is a goal-directed conscious or unconscious process in which people attempt to influence the perceptions of other people about a person, object or event; they do so by regulating and controlling information in social interaction (Piwinger & Ebert 2001, pp. 1-2). It is usually used synonymously with self-presentation, in which a person tries to influence the perception of their image. The notion of impression management also refers to practices in professional communication and public relations, where the term is used to describe the process of formation of a company's or organization's public image.

Motives and strategies

There are two main motives that govern self-presentation. One is instrumental: we want to influence others and gain rewards (Schlenker 1980, pp. 92). There are three instrumental goals. The first is ingratiation, when we try to be happy and display our good qualities so that others will like us (Schlenker 1980, pp. 169). The second is intimidation, which is aggressively showing anger to get others to hear and obey us. The third is supplication, when we try to be vulnerable and sad so people will help us and feel bad for us.

The second motive of self-presentation is expressive. We construct an image of ourselves to claim personal identity, and present ourselves in a manner that is consistent with that image. If we feel like this is restricted, we exhibit reactance/be defiant. We try to assert our freedom against those who would seek to curtail our self-presentation expressiveness. A classic example is the idea of the "preacher's daughter", whose suppressed personal identity and emotions cause an eventual backlash at her family and community.

Concerning the strategies followed to establish a certain impression, the main distinction is between defensive and assertive strategies. Whereas defensive strategies include behaviours like avoidance of threatening situations or means of self-handicapping, assertive strategies refer to more active behaviour like the verbal idealisation of the self, the use of status symbols or similar practices.

Theory

Impression management (IM) theory states that any individual or organization must establish and maintain impressions that are congruent with the perceptions they want to convey to their publics. From both a communications and public relations viewpoint, the theory of impression management encompasses the vital ways in which one establishes and communicates this congruence between personal or organizational goals and their intended actions which create public perception.

The idea that perception is reality is the basis for this sociological and social psychology theory, which is framed around the presumption that the other's perceptions of you or your organization

become the reality from which they form ideas and the basis for intended behaviors.

Basic factors

A range of factors that govern impression management can be identified. It can be stated that impression management becomes necessary whenever there exists a kind of social situation, whether real or imaginary. Logically, the awareness of being a potential subject of monitoring is also crucial. Furthermore, the characteristics of a given social situation are important. Specifically, the surrounding cultural norms determine the appropriateness of particular nonverbal behaviours. The actions have to be appropriate to the targets, and within that culture, so that the kind of audience as well as the relation to the audience influences the way impression management is realized. A person's goals are another factor governing the ways and strategies of impression management. This refers to the content of an assertion, which also leads to distinct ways of presentation of aspects of the self. The degree of self-efficacy describes whether a person is convinced that it is possible to convey the intended impression.

A new study finds that, all other things being equal, people are more likely to pay attention to faces that have been associated with negative gossip than those with neutral or positive associations. The study contributes to a body of work showing that far from being objective, our perceptions are shaped by unconscious brain processes that determine what we "choose" to see or ignore -- even before we become aware of it. The findings also add to the idea that the brain evolved to be particularly sensitive to "bad guys" or cheaters -- fellow humans who undermine social life by deception, theft or other non-cooperative behavior.

Erving Goffman

Strategic interpersonal behavior to shape or influence impressions formed by an audience is not a new field; he was however known in his field to have some unjustified theories about the nuclear family, it has a rich history. Plato spoke of the "stage of human life" and Shakespeare crafted the famous sentence "All the world is a stage, and all the men and women merely players". In the 20th century, Erving Goffman also followed a dramaturgical analogy in his seminal book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, in which he said, "All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify."

Goffman presented impression management dramaturgically, explaining the motivations behind complex human performances within a social setting based on a play metaphor. Goffman's work incorporates aspects of a symbolic interactionist perspective, emphasizing a qualitative analysis of the interactive nature of the communication process.

The actor, shaped by the environment and target audience, sees interaction as a performance.

The objective of the performance is to provide the audience with an impression consistent with the desired goals of the actor. Thus, impression management is also highly dependent on the situation. In addition to these goals, individuals differ in responses from the interactional environment, some may be irresponsive to audience's reactions while others actively respond to audience reactions in order to elicit positive results. These differences in response towards the environment and target audience are called self-monitoring. Another factor in impression management is self-verification, the act of conforming the audience to the person's self-concept.

The audience can be real or imaginary. IM style norms, part of the mental programming received through socialization, are so fundamental that we usually do not notice our expectations of them. While an actor (speaker) tries to project a desired image, an audience (listener) might attribute a resonant or discordant image. An example is provided by situations in which embarrassment occurs and threatens the image of a participant.

The media

The medium of communication influences the actions taken in impression management. Self-efficacy can differ according to the fact whether the trial to convince somebody is made through face-to-face-interaction or by means of an e-mail. Communication via devices like telephone, e-mail or chat is governed by technical restrictions, so that the way people express personal features etc. can be changed. This often shows how far people will go.

Significance in empirical research and economy

Impression management can distort the results of empirical research that relies on interviews and surveys, a phenomenon commonly referred to as "social desirability bias". Impression management Theory nevertheless constitutes a field of research on its own. When it comes to practical questions concerning public relations and the way organizations should handle their public image, the assumptions provided by impression management theory can also provide a framework.

An examination of different impression management strategies acted out by individuals who were facing criminal trials where the trial outcomes could range from a death sentence, life in prison or acquittal has been reported in the forensic literature. The Perri and Lichtenwald article examined female psychopathic killers, whom as a group were highly motivated to manage the impression that attorneys, judges, mental health professions and ultimately, a jury had of the murderers and the murder they committed. It provides legal case illustrations of the murderers combining and/or switching from one impression management strategy such as ingratiation or supplication to another as they worked towards their goal of diminishing or eliminating any accountability for the murders they committed.