

# First Impressions:

*What People See...and Never Forget.*



# Felicia DePriest – Holcomb

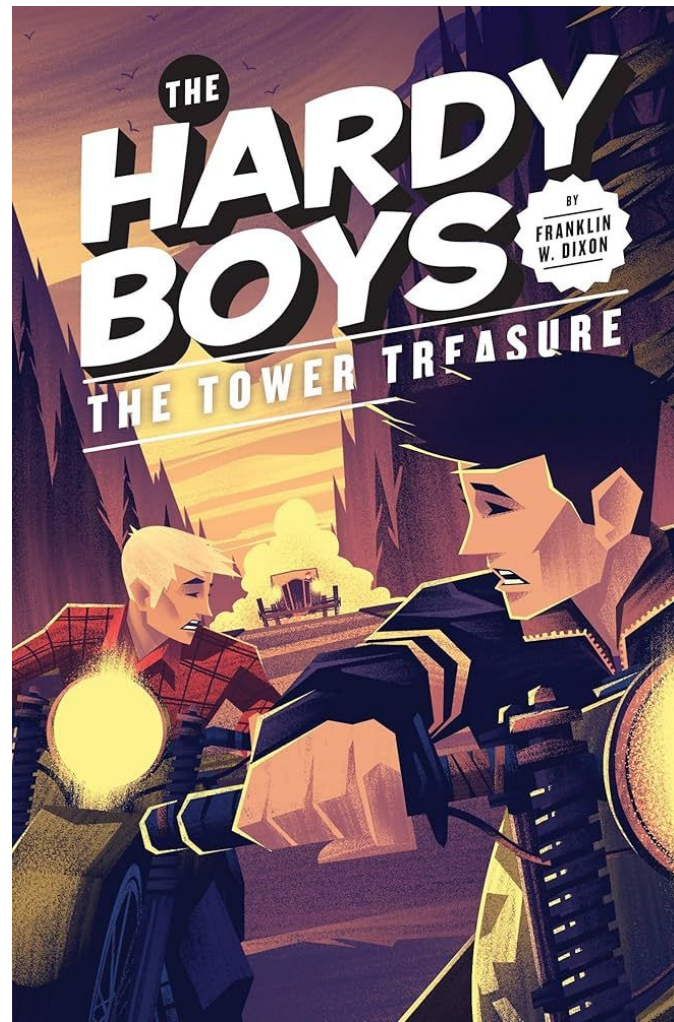
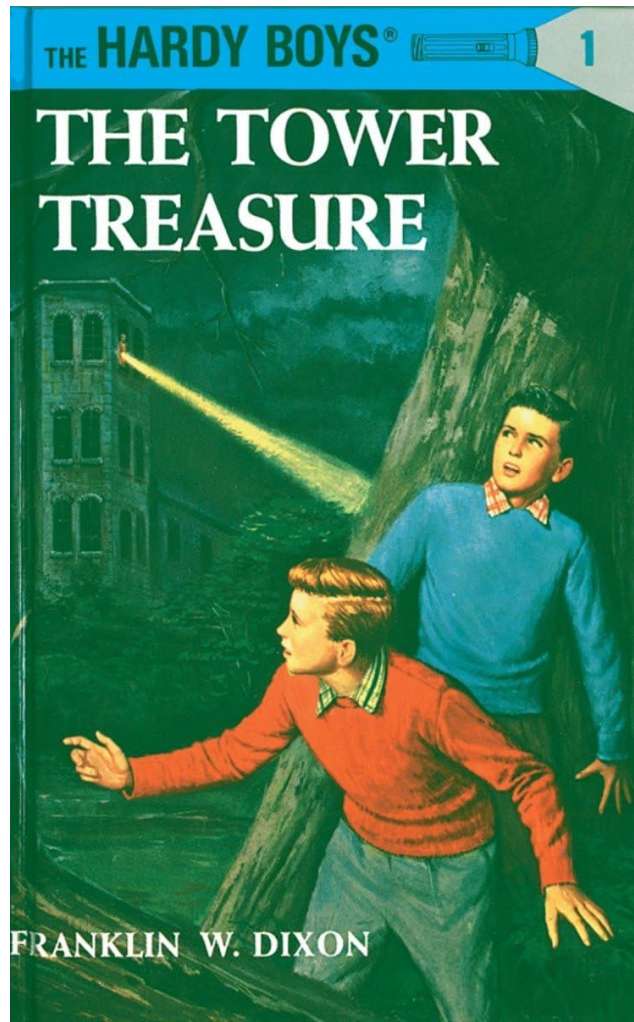
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Don't judge a book  
by its cover.













# First Impressions:

*What People See...and Never Forget.*

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First impressions are the lasting  
impression...

If not positive, it may be your *last* impression.



It takes ~ **7 seconds** to form a complete first impression.

That is **7 seconds** to convince a  
parent...

...your school is the **best place** for  
their child.

...their child will be physically  
safe.

...their child will be loved and nurtured by caring adults.

...their child will encounter Christ  
and grow spiritually.

...their child will **grow socially**,  
making meaningful friendships.

...their child will **grow**  
**academically** and be prepared for  
future success.

...that they can afford your school.

...that it's **worth** paying tuition.

That's **7 seconds** to convince a student...

...they **want** to go to your school.

...they will make friends.

...learning can be fun.

...teachers will treat them *fairly*.

*No pressure.*

Guess what?

It applies to **donors** and  
**job seekers**, too.

**How** do we make a good first  
impression?

# Prospective & Current Parents

- Age & Generation
- Culture
- Language
- Level of education
- Experience with Catholic education
- Socioeconomic status

# 4 First Impression Influencers:



**LOW  
COST**

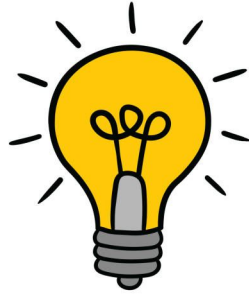


# #1: Environmental Factors

# **Environmental factors:**

- Appearance
- Cleanliness and organization
- Lighting
- Noise level
- Decor and visual appeal

Physical appearance plays a dominant role in initial judgments.



**Think:** What does the front of your school look like *right now*?



NO PARKING  
TAXI ZONE

TAXI 5994 TAXI





St. Dominic  
Catholic S  
Burrhead  
Marshei



Google Maps





St. Benedict Catholic School

A Annie Quinn

Photo - Mar 2019



Google Maps

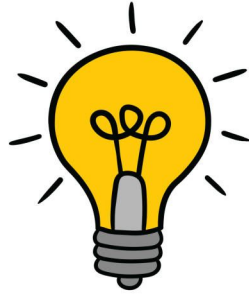


**Think:** What does the front office look like?

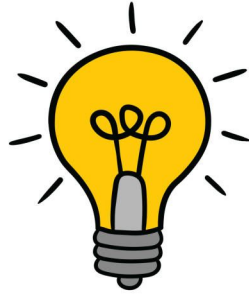




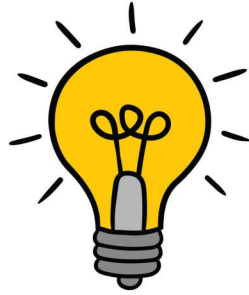




**Think:** What does the front office look like on its *craziest* day?



**Think:** What would I think if *I* was a prospective parent?



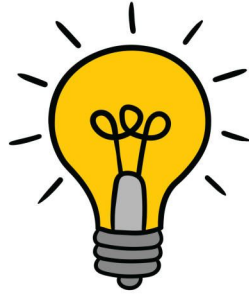
**Think:** Is the building warm and inviting or cold and intimidating?







**Think:** Does the entry process suggest a safe school?



**Think:** Can you *see* the office staff member when you arrive?

Front office staff may have the single most important role in recruitment (and retention).



## #2: Nonverbal Factors

# Nonverbal Factors:

- Clothing and grooming
- Body language and posture
- Facial expression
- Eye contact
- Handshake

*Remember your audience*

Nonverbal cues, such as confident posture, eye contact, and smiling enhance perceived credibility and warmth.







People form judgments about others' trustworthiness, competence, and likability within **100 milliseconds** of seeing their face.



Front-office staff interactions can have **more weight** in shaping parental perception than institutional policies or curriculum descriptions.



Negative interactions last longer –  
sometimes requiring **5-10 positive  
follow-ups** to recover trust.

That's a lot of work to combat a single grumpy interaction.

**Make a Good First  
Impression:**  
Simple Nonverbal  
Strategies  
*(backed by science)*



Smile genuinely.

Lau, S (1982)

Ambady & Rosenthal (1993)

Delevati & Cesar (1994)

LaFrance & Hecht (1995)

Nakashima et al. (2012)

Voelkle et al. (2012)

Hass et al. (2016)

Gibson et al. (2018)

Finkelstein et al. (2025)

Frontiers in Medicine (2025)

McDuff & Berger (2025)

Make *eye contact.*

(Kleine 1986)

Dress *appropriately*.

(Howlett 2013)

Use the person's name.

(Carneige, 2004)

Have an open posture.

(Carney, Cuddy, & Yap, 2010)



**Closed Posture**  
Can indicate hostility,  
unfriendliness, and anxiety



**Open Posture**  
May indicate friendliness,  
openness, and willingness

Speak clearly and with  
warmth.

(McAleer, 2014)

Avoid **filler words** (e.g.  
um, uh, like).

(Brennan & Schober, 2001)

# Mirror the listener's communication style

(pacing, energy, vocabulary, length, body language).

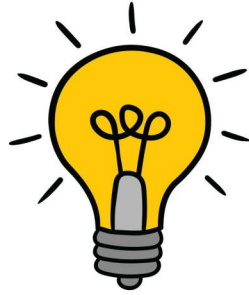
(Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991)

It applies to the phone,  
too.

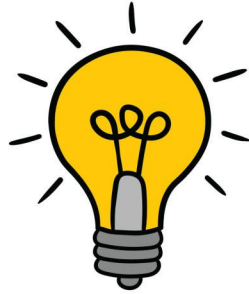
**Fun Fact:** People can literally "hear" a smile over the phone. When you smile, the muscle movements slightly lift your larynx and open your vocal tract. **This creates a brighter, warmer, and more inviting tone that listeners can detect,** even without seeing your face.

*Vivien Tartter (1980)*

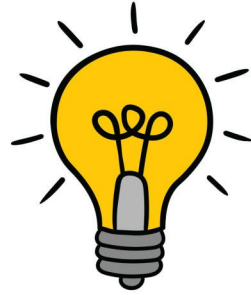
Staff behavior (positive or negative) are highly correlated with customers' overall satisfaction.



**Think:** If a teacher is in the office,  
do they say *hello* to families?



**Think:** If the custodian is in the office, do they say *hello* to families?



**Think:** Does ALL office staff smile and greet ALL visitors?

**Hard Truth:** If your office staff does not **LOVE** their school, they may not be the right person to be the **FACE** of the school.



### #3: Verbal Factors

# Verbal Factors:

- Word choice
- Tone of voice
- Clarity
- Brevity
- Politeness
- **Content**





## Tours & Visits

Have *clear* expectations.

Make sure *everyone* knows the  
procedures.

Map it out.



Map it out.  
*Literally.*



# Secret Shop



Once formed, first impressions  
are **highly resistant to change**,  
even in the face of new,  
contradictory information.

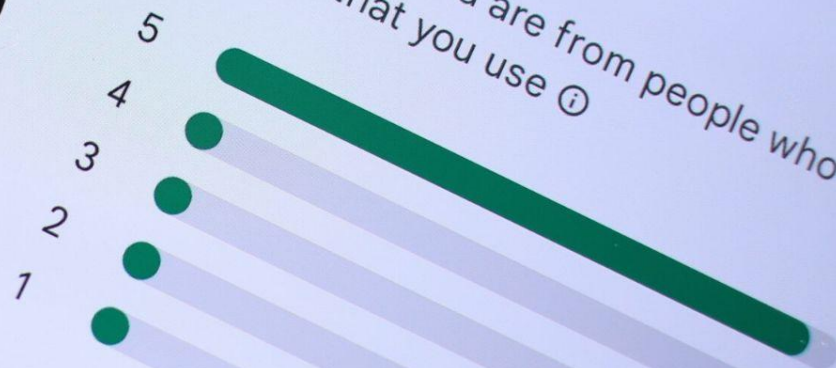
(Fiske & Taylor, 2013)

That includes your digital  
footprint.

## Ratings and reviews

Ratings and reviews are verified and are from people who use the same type of device that you use ⓘ

5.0



#4: Digital Factors

# Digital Factors

- Ease of access
- Up-to-date information
- Online reviews
- Online photos
- Digital presence

# **Locations:**

- Website
- Social media
- Online reviews
- News coverage



**Try it:** Google your school. What images appear?



**Try it:** What impression is made?



**Try it:** Does it showcase what is amazing about your school?

## Day 2 Workshops:

- First Impressions Audit: The Prospective Parent Experience
- First Impressions Audit: Social Media



[Website / SEO Audit](#)

**What are your takeaways?**

**How can you apply this to  
prospective donors and  
teachers?**

**What action items have you  
created for yourself?**

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