

Understanding How Others Perceive You

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Why is it important for an actor to know how he or she is perceived? Can't an actor play *any* role? Perhaps the best ones can, but not in the world of commercials, where you have only a few seconds to show the director and the ad agency why you're the instant read and thus the best choice to sell their product.

Casting directors often say, "Just be yourself," but what they really mean is "Just be my perception of you." That's the actor's conundrum. Let me give an example: I'm nice. I bake my own doggie bones. I'm president of a breast cancer nonprofit. Close friends tell me I'm funny. Above all, I'm nice. But when I started trying to book commercials 20 years ago, for the first two years I couldn't land one to save my life.

Then casting director Beth Holmes called me in on a Compaq computer audition. My character description: "A strident, severe, IBM Nazi." Strident? Severe? Wait a minute, I'm the nice one. I should play the mommy, the pretty lady, the hero—I'm nice, damn it!

I get a callback. Huh? I book the gig. What?! At that point I take a step back and say, "Okay, maybe we should embrace our severity." Still, I continued to audition as the nice girl as well, and I continued to fail to book work. So I decided to take a class with image consultant Sam Christensen (www.samchristensen.com), who works with actors to help them market themselves.

As Christensen puts it in an article called "Marketing an Acting Career": "In its simplest breakdown, marketing to consumers—of any product—can be reduced to three essential principles. These are: product identity, packaging, and placement. The secret has to do with the all-important governing concept of product identity." You are the product, and your identity is crucial. Your consumers are agents, CDs, directors, and producers. What I found so indispensable about Christensen's teaching is how his process informs every important deci-

sion you make as an actor. For example, your packaging includes such things as the design of your headshot. Your product placement includes how your agent pitches you to the casting director.

Here's what Christensen deems an essential element in understanding how you're perceived: There are no bad words. I've been called *imperialious*, *ice queen*, *snooty*, *aloof*, and *emasculating executive in a suit*. The words seem unkind, but they are my money. I heard them for the first time in Christensen's class, and they forever changed how I went about the audition process. I finally embraced my persona, and I began booking work.

Interestingly, knowing who you are isn't the same as knowing how you are perceived. You may really be a nice, approachable, friendly guy, but that doesn't help if you're not seen that way by others. In such a situation, Christensen suggests that you ask yourself if "you secretly want to be the sexy guy, tough-love dad, rich, edgy. Remember that friendly, goofy, nice guys can have a sexual, edgy, and successful side."

If you want to find out how you're perceived, try these two experiments: 1) Send an email to everyone you know and ask them to describe you in one word. 2) Stop strangers on the street, at the mall, in line for a movie, and tell them, "I'm a student writing a paper on first impressions. Please write down one or two words to describe me. They don't have to be nice words." Christensen advises, "If some words come up often that you don't like—e.g., *hard* or *nebbishy*—go to www.thesaurus.com and find synonyms. *Hard* can also be *solid*, *unbreakable*, *strong*. And *nebbishy* could be *funny*, *entertaining*, *vulnerable*."

In commercials, being very clear about how you're perceived will save you time and gas and ensure that you get out on the right auditions. And the right audition is your chance to create a relationship with that casting office.



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