

FAST FORCES OF ATTRACTION

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF SEX APPEAL

When you're attracted to someone, your whole body switches on. It's like hearing the first bars of your favorite song. And though it might feel like magic, it isn't random. It's just too complex for us to discern the harmony. Attraction is so subtle that we would trip over our own feet if we were aware of every move. That's why our brains have set us up to draw instantaneous inferences from tiny nuances of behavior, what psychologists call "thin slices" of judgment. We form first impressions of another's attractiveness in a tenth of a second, generating a symphonic burst of desire in which everything from voice to wit plays a part.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RYAN HESHKA





SMOOTH TALK

What we listen for in a voice

The sound of a sexy voice can echo for generations (“Happy Birthday, Mr. President...”). And the dissonance of an ear-blistering cackle can turn away even the most interested suitors (call it the Fran Drescher effect). But between these extremes, how much do we weigh the voice of a potential partner—and what do we listen for when they first open their mouths?

Accents affect our perceptions, as do speed and pitch. We judge fast talkers to be more educated, and those with varied inflection to be more interesting. Men prefer higher voices in women, and women like deeper voices in men (especially when ovulating or looking for a short-term relationship). Pitch correlates only loosely with height, but is closely tied to hormone levels—meaning it’s a good indicator of fertility or dominance, as well as health and attractiveness. “In general, people with attractive voices have attractive faces,” says David Feinberg, a psychologist at McMaster University.

If your voice eclipses your face as your star quality, keep your mouth moving. A recent study showed that hearing tones that matched men’s or women’s voices made androgynous headshots appear more masculine or feminine. In other words, a sonorous voice can actually enhance your looks.



IN GOOD REPUTE

The delicate matter of advance word

No matter how spectacular your entrance, your reputation got there before you. And it has primed everyone's reptilian brain to render a high-speed decision on whether you are to be trusted. If the answer is affirmative, that charming chap holding court in the center of the room may be kindly disposed to flash you a smile, let down his guard, and begin the dance of attraction.

But if the amygdala sends up a caution flag—otherwise known as anxiety—you may have to work extra hard to create a positive impression. It may be, finds a team of German and Austrian researchers, that we're all far more attuned to advance word than to the evidence before our very eyes.

People like people whom others find attractive. You might be inclined to think it's because socializing with (or sleeping with) the It girl enhances your own status in the crowd. And maybe it does. But a recent study suggests it's also an effective mating shortcut. Choosing a good partner takes time and energy. When one woman finds a guy attractive, others are likely to flock to him too. Scientists call it "mate-choice copying." It makes life easier for fish and birds, and it turns out to be the way people operate, too.



CLASS ACTION

The allure of shared pedigree

Most of us are drawn to those who hail from our own side of the tracks, and men and women are marrying within their social class much more than ever.

The outward signs of pedigree have gotten trickier to read, thanks to modern informality in dress and the ubiquity of cheap, high-quality clothing, notes Dalton Conley, a sociologist at NYU. Yet we're deft at passing style judgments that place people precisely on the socioeconomic spectrum.

We're attracted to people who look like a class match because we think they'll validate our own choices and values and share our interests and opinions.

"We all love the story of *Pretty Woman*, but generally it doesn't work that way," says Conley. "How someone does their hair and nails and how they dress is difficult to separate from their innate attractiveness. It's a package deal."

THE ONCE OVER

Not all flesh is created equal.

Ask five people what they find attractive, and you'll get a lesson in human variability: girls with ears that stick out; guys with soulful eyes.

But ask 5,000 people and clear patterns emerge. Some traits have universal sex appeal because they're markers of good genes, health, and fertility: a fit body, clear skin, a symmetrical face with average-sized and -shaped features, and traits that mark sex hormones: Angelina Jolie's big lips indicate high estrogen, while George Clooney's square jaw signals he's got testosterone to burn. Women swoon over men with "adult" faces—marked by strong chin and nose—while men like women who look childlike, with smooth skin, small noses, and high cheekbones.

And everything you fear about height and weight is true: A woman's desirability in a speed dating situation is determined largely by her thinness, while each extra inch of height gives men a 5 percent edge in the number of women interested in dating him.

But we tend to wind up with people of similar stature and girth—meaning short men end up with even shorter women, and people choose partners with similar builds. After all, a warm glance from a charmer who's within size range is infinitely more alluring than a runway model's cold shoulder.



IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE

State of mind matters, but not in the way you think.

We think of good moods as attractive—the cheerful extrovert with the full smile is more appealing than the moping loner in the corner. But researchers find what matters even more is your own mood.

Your mood affects your perceptions of others, especially in new encounters. Feeling sad, for example, dulls your sensitivity to others' nonverbal cues, impairing your quick-take judgment and forcing you into a more deliberative, less accurate mode of constructing first impressions.

It does the same in a potential partner. So while you might be your most scintillating self, if the girl you're closing in on is having a down day, she's virtually blind to your charms. Which takes us to the heart of attraction. It holds up a flattering mirror to us. We're attracted to someone when we like the way we look in their eyes. We're most attracted to those who see us as we want to be seen, who allow us room to stretch—to be, or become, our best self.

THE CHARM OFFENSIVE

When two hearts beat as one

Charisma is charm in neon lights, a social gift we can't help but respond to when we see it. A person with charisma—think: Oprah—may bend the light waves in a room, oozing confidence and self-esteem, and we move closer because confidence makes others feel good. A person's self-esteem guides our instant evaluations: "Hmm, if she likes herself, there must be something there for me to like, too."

The deep secret of charismatic people, however, may be their ability to create synchrony, to induce you to adjust your bearing, speech rate, even heart rate—through locking eyes, through touch, or simply because you feel a strong rapport. Researchers believe our strongest perceptions of mutual attraction develop in those first encounters where two people have a measurable physiological reaction to one another. It's not exactly chemistry—it's more like electricity.



WALKING TALL

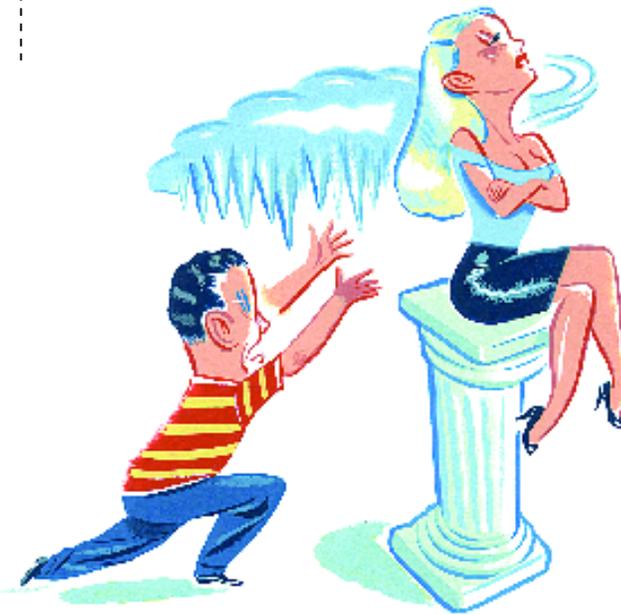
Confident and friendly movements are key.

Mom was right: Good posture and a genuine smile are crucial elements of attraction. In fact, we register facial expression, hand gestures, and posture even more quickly than looks or style.

Those who look relaxed yet assured are attractive because they put us at ease—perhaps because we interpret others' movements using mirror neurons in our brains that engender copycat emotions, says John Neffinger, a political consultant who specializes in nonverbal behavior.

"Internally summon up the attitude you're trying to project," Neffinger advises. "Think about what you felt like the last time you truly felt confident. Once you've recaptured that feeling, you'll stand tall as you walk into the room."

And since we're all suckers for flattery, the easiest way to look good is to look interested. Channel your inner Bill Clinton by using steady eye contact, keeping your palms turned up, nodding, and pointing your feet toward your target.



PLAYING HARD TO GET

When to get your game on

We've all had the experience. You make a connection, you leave a message, and...the other person doesn't get back to you. You wait, and wonder. Is there something wrong with you? Did they meet someone else? Then, when they finally do call, you're so relieved you never want to let them go.

"When you don't seem too available, it makes you mysterious," says Robert

Greene, author of *The Art of Seduction*. "Anything you do that makes their imagination take flight furthers the seduction process."

If you're excited about someone, uncertainty about their interest in you can heighten your attraction to them, explains Paul Eastwick, a psychologist at Northwestern. You have a drive to reduce the uncertainty, which causes you to obsess—which in turn deepens your feelings.

We all want what we can't have. Someone playing hard to get forces us to invest more, and the more effort we put in, the more we assume it must be worth it.

Playing hard to get works because it increases a person's perceived value. "It's simple sexual economics," explains Peter Jonason, a researcher at New Mexico State University. "You give the impression of lower availability, increasing demand." But hard-to-get is a dangerous game. We like people who like us back, and if you seem too unattainable, you risk causing the other person to give up. In sum: Stretching out that period of anxious anticipation can be a powerful weapon of courtship. Use with caution.

WOO WITH WISECRACKS

Separating the wit from the chaff

All it takes is one good joke to break the ice. But while everyone wants a partner with a sense of humor, guys are usually the ones cracking wise. Why? Studies suggest that women think humor-generating men are hot because wit signals intelligence and creativity—but that men value humor appreciation much more because it indicates sexual receptivity.

The prospect of everlasting lopsided banter may not appeal to either sex, but men and women do digest humor differently.

Women, the more selective daters, are also more discriminating about jokes. Brain imaging shows they process jokes more deeply and reap a larger reward response from good ones, while rejecting duds without hesitation.

Mirthmaking displays social prowess in addition to brains: knowing what to say, with what timing, in what company. Of course, the joke teller can also use humor for culling contestants: Tell a quirky joke and you're looking for the person who gets it—and gets you. Humor is serious business: Research shows that humor compatibility promotes marital bliss.