One Chance for Your Best First Impression: Tips for New Pharmacists

Kathryn K. Marwitz¹, John B. Hertig¹, and Robert J. Weber²

Abstract

Background: New practitioner pharmacists enter the workplace with an array of knowledge and skills ready to engage in patient care. However, obtaining a first postgraduate position or earning a desired promotion poses a challenge when the candidate pool is filled with many similarly skilled professionals. **Objective:** Educate new practitioner pharmacists on ways to pitch their new skills and make a memorable first impression among their competition. **Methods:** This article aims to (1) enhance their career prospects by practicing their soft skills, (2) develop strategies to build credibility and creating a personal brand and (3) describe efforts to showcase their professional identity. **Conclusions:** Preceptors and mentors can help by providing effective feedback to new pharmacists in efforts to improve performance and enhance soft skills.

Keywords

management, personal brand, pharmacists

Introduction

As the pharmacist job market becomes increasingly competitive, implementing methods to distinguish one's self during interviews and in the workplace is essential in achieving a desired position. For example, while the number of postgraduate pharmacy residency positions is increasing, the number of qualified candidates is increasing as well.¹ New pharmacists are experiencing a competitive job market further fueled by innovation, clinical skill, and changes in pharmacist scope of practice. In turn, new pharmacists are taking on greater clinical and patient care roles and helping move the profession of pharmacy forward.

One career path the new pharmacist graduate may consider is that of residency or fellowship. Residencies and fellowships provide an intensive yet worthwhile pathway for the motivated new practitioner to learn hands-on skills, develop their practice with mentorship, and transition from student to pharmacist. While maintaining a competitive grade point average, extracurricular involvement, work experience, and volunteerism are all still important aspects of a candidate's curriculum vitae, there are further action steps new professionals can take to ensure their visibility in a competitive job market. Practicing soft skills, such as building credibility and practicing first impressions, are needed to showcase a new practitioner's professional identity.

Thin-Slicing and First Impressions

Researchers have quantified that humans develop opinions and thoughts about one another within 5 minutes of meeting.^{2,3} These thoughts garnered from short and often high-pressured

interactions are relatively accurate and often shape one's relationships.³ In fact, after that first impression is made, it becomes challenging to alter that impression, particularly if a poor first impression is made.⁴ Thus, emphasis should be put on ensuring that a first impression is practiced and represents an authentic and true self.

To address this challenge with first impressions, it is important to quantify and describe the phenomenon that induces these complex situations. First coined in 1993, thin slices of behavior, or more colloquially, thin-slicing, helps explain why humans form judgments of complete strangers after just short interactions.² This common social science theme was best popularized in Malcolm Gladwell's novel, *Blink*, and widely spread from there. Thin-slicing involves observing a small selection of an interaction with someone and using that observation to draw conclusions about that person.² These short interactions ultimately shape the observer's perception moving forward.²

Thin-slicing is an unconscious and central process. While one's accuracy with thin-slicing may change, all individuals possess the capacity to engage in thin-slicing and use these formed opinions to make broad-reaching conclusions. The benefit of thin-slicing is that the observation process is condensed and the capacity for conclusion-making remains

¹Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA

²The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA

Corresponding Author:

Robert J. Weber, Administrator, Department of Pharmacy, The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center, 368 Doan Hall, Columbus, OH 43210, USA

Email: Robert.Weber@osumc.edu

Figure 1. Process for enhancing confidence.

large. The keys to mastering the influence of thin-slicing are to recognize its presence and to learn how to highlight the most admirable skills during any first impression. Thin-slicing most often harms individuals who underestimate the impact of a first impression. Creating awareness of how humans engage and form opinions with one another can lend the new professional to enhance their repertoire of strengths and interview skills.

Building Confidence

As new pharmacists work to build up their range of professional skills, confidence and credibility should be a primary focus as these attributes often separate the good pharmacists from the great pharmacists.

Being a new practitioner can be overwhelming. For one, completing years of education to achieve a professional degree has contributed to numerous long nights and stressful days. Too much confidence can close off the mind to learning and growth and induce reckless behavior; all of these are unacceptable for patient care. Conversely, without confidence, a new practitioner may find trouble adjusting to their new position and their work performance may suffer.

Enhancing confidence can be developed with small situational changes as outlined in Figure 1. New pharmacists should focus on and practice, first, their physical mannerisms. Pen tapping, nail biting, eye contact avoidance, crossed arms, and nervous movements are nonverbal giveaways that undermine the confidence of new practitioners. These habits are often learned and can therefore be unlearned. New practitioners should be mindful of the nonverbal cues they exude and by turning these habits into conscious thoughts, new practitioners possess the skills needed to ditch these habits all together. For particularly engrained nonverbal habits, new practitioners can recruit mentors and friends to highlight when these habits surface, helping to make the new practitioner more conscious of the occurrence.

New pharmacists should also consider how their communication skills influence their confidence. They should work to achieve attributes of dependability, professionalism, positivity, self-motivation, worth, and ethics.^{5,6} New pharmacists can enhance these attributes by expressing appreciation and gratitude toward staff and mentors often, by initiating conversations with coworkers and employees, and by dressing to show they respect their work.^{5,6} These actions express that a new pharmacist appreciates an opportunity and is working hard to fit in with the culture of the organization. New pharmacists should complete tasks accurately and on time and clarify uncertainties with mentors and supervisors.^{5,6}

Portraying Credibility

While balancing confidence as a new pharmacist can be a familiar concept, most new pharmacists may forget about also building up their credibility. However, confidence and credibility go hand-in-hand. Credibility is the ability for coworkers and supervisors to rely on a new pharmacist's work ethic, judgment, and skills to get projects done well.⁷ New pharmacists can enhance their visibility at work or during an interview if they can demonstrate the ways in which they are credible.

In efforts to portray credibility in the work environment, new pharmacists should hone in on traits of empathy, humility, reliability, and teamwork.⁸ These traits allow new professionals to demonstrate their commitment to pharmacy practice. The most credible of people are sought out for collaborative work, but a new professional must first develop and sustain relationships with others to establish credibility. Credibility can come from building community in the workspace, and new professionals can work on community building by getting to know coworkers and volunteering for organizational positions or on behalf of their organization.⁸

Credible workers work to create their own opportunities within the scope of their work environments.^{7,8} New pharmacists may envision new services and new positions within a particular pharmacy, and credible pharmacists look for ways to make it possible. A new pharmacist's vision may be too large, but new pharmacists can work with mentors and colleagues to develop more structured and realistic goals to move close to that vision. Credible people create meaning in their work. For new pharmacists, creating meaning in everyday work can help them focus their goals, structure their plans, and create an opportunity to build credibility in their everyday work life.

Developing a Personal Brand

In efforts to interview best and stand out in a group of qualified candidates, new pharmacists may consider how best to develop their personal brands. Most new pharmacists are transitioning from student to resident, fellow, or practicing pharmacist and that in itself requires introspection and focus.

Figure 2. Components of a first impression.

Figure 3. Soft skills development process.

Consider taking some time during this process to examine how an ideal pharmacist should look. Start by listing out one's current knowledge and skills, abilities, and experience and consider what is both desired for a position but also helps to distinguish oneself from other candidates.⁹ Personal assessments such as *Strengthfinders* by Tom Rath and *Meyers'-Briggs Type Indicator* by C. G. Jung may help the new pharmacist understand the skills and strengths they bring to the workplace. In addition, consider what isn't included in an ideal pharmacist brand and ensure that those qualities don't bubble to the surface during interviews and

work performance. It is worth consulting with a trusted mentor or colleague about one's personal brand and having them assess whether that is the message being conveyed.⁹

When developing a personal brand, it is important to create opportunities that show off the brand in the work arena.⁹ Make sure that supervisors, mentors, and interviewers understand this personal brand by creating moments and interactions that highlight its strongest attributes.⁹ Weave this brand throughout a life story to create authenticity and make the brand and the work both visible and memorable. Finally, remember that personal brands need to remain fluid and adaptable.⁹ New pharmacists will work and gain experience and organizational goals and management will shift. A new pharmacist would be remiss if they did not update their personal brand to fit changes in personal experience and also the organization's objectives.

Rehearsing Soft Skills

After spending numerous years in school training, new pharmacists have acquired the hard skills required for competent pharmacy practice. In addition, pharmacists have the ability to retrain and maintain their level of mastery through required continuing education and optional board certification. However, the abilities needed for mastery of soft skills are much harder to be learned and quantified and take additional attention for development. Therefore, in efforts for new pharmacists to set themselves apart, they need to focus and rehearse their soft skills.

Soft skills such as confidence and credibility can help new pharmacists improve their interviewing and create strong first impressions. New pharmacists should focus on their confidence, credibility, and personal branding alongside building their knowledge of pharmacotherapy as seen in Figure 2. Interweaving these learning moments together can help new pharmacists improve their work performance and also promote their strengths during interviews.

However, soft skills do not develop passively. Soft skills need to be identified, rehearsed, and assessed frequently as displayed in Figure 3. Soft skills stand out during interviews and during work performance simply by actions and words. Soft skills do not appear on resumes but may be assessed when an interviewer asks about one's strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, new pharmacists need to hone in on these soft skills, recognize additional soft skills they can improve upon, and practice these skills through conversation, introspection, and repetition.

Providing Feedback: The Role of the Preceptor

One of the most vital roles a preceptor can play in a new practitioner's experience is that of providing feedback. However, skills of providing and receiving feedback are often undertaught in the academic and work environments.

There are many different studies and opinions regarding the art and methods of providing feedback, but the overarching theme stems around providing 2-way, planned feedback often and underscoring behavior rather than personality.^{10,11}

One method of providing feedback often referenced in the literature is the Feedback Sandwich. This method includes providing one area of improvement surrounded by two positive remarks.¹¹ The rationale for this method is that by providing positive information first, the person receiving feedback can take comfort in their good work and the person providing feedback can build trust.¹¹ While this method is popular, there are also many criticisms. For example, Henley and colleagues found that providing any organized feedback following a performance is more efficacious than not doing so, but using the Feedback Sandwich method does not produce a difference in success among other feedback methodologies.¹³ In addition, critics of the Feedback Sandwich insist that those receiving feedback often see through this method and feel that the positive feedback given is simply used to hide the impending critique.¹³

Another feedback method to consider is the *Start, Stop, Continue* method. This method asks the person receiving feedback to name one thing they would like to begin doing, one thing they could stop doing, and one thing they should continue doing all in relation to a project or performance.¹⁴ After the person receiving feedback identifies these items, the person giving feedback will engage in discussion around these statements and help the receiver set specific goals. This type of feedback is generally well-received as learners often prefer structured feedback over nonstructured feedback.¹⁴

Managers and preceptors may consider the different feedback methods available and tailor a feedback session to meet to the needs of the situation. Before providing feedback, a preceptor should ask the new practitioners how they prefer to receive feedback and incorporate these preferences fully.¹² After providing feedback, preceptors can ask for feedback on their feedback methods to better understand how their feedback was received. Collectively, both giving and receiving feedback as a preceptor and as a learner are processes that improve with experience and grow over time.

Conclusion

New pharmacists work in challenging environments and require constant learning and reflection. In addition to all the pressures of interviewing and career advancement, new pharmacists should focus on developing and rehearsing their soft skills. As new pharmacists work to enhance their soft skills, preceptors can assist them by providing quality and effective feedback regarding work performance. Pharmacists may feel pressure to develop their pharmacist knowledge but

that knowledge is just one component of making a strong first impression. Exuding confidence and credibility and developing a personal brand all help shape a new pharmacist's career path by enhancing first impressions and transforming other's thin-slicing capabilities for ideal outcomes.

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