

# What Does Your Workspace Say About Your Competence?

By DIANNA BOOHER JUNE 22, 2021



It was what came *after* the colonoscopy that gave me the creeps. The gastro doctor came to me as a referral from my family physician, so I'd booked my first baseline scope through his office,

Pulling into the office space outside his building six months later, I was disappointed to see the small run-down, one-story building. The masonry needed a good power-wash, and the landscape needed serious attention. The lobby was dimly lit and cluttered with out-of-date magazines. I was the only patient waiting. Movie scenes of back-alley abortions flashed through my mind.

Shortly after, the receptionist, who was also the nurse, took me back to an exam room, which was piled high with more outdated magazines, as well as health posters and charts rolled up in unused corners of the room. The doctor came in almost immediately. After a brief greeting, he sat down beside the exam table with a clipboard and checklist and began reading off symptoms, checking “yes” or “no” according to my answers.

“Here are the photos from your procedure...Good thing we caught this... I’ll need to see you again in six months. You can make another appointment out front.”

I never did. I couldn’t escape the creepy feeling of those surroundings.

Five years later when I went to another gastroenterologist for my second scope, I mentioned the first doctor’s name and asked about his reputation in the medical community. The second doctor’s response: “Let me just say, you deserve better care than that.”

My perception — based purely on surroundings — colored my confidence in the internist’s credentials. In the same way, your “packaging” may be communicating messages you don’t intend.

## “Packaging” Creates Perception

Consider the difference packaging makes in how much you’re willing to pay for almost any product or service. Studies by [Ipsos](#), 3M, and others suggest that buyers are willing to pay more for products that come in attractive, quality packaging.

Check your own bias: Let’s say you’re shopping for dishwashing detergent: Which are you more likely to buy? The detergent that comes in a clear glass bottle, with a simple black-and-white



## Your "Packaging" Includes Your Physical Presence

You'll find the same reactions to the presentation of your physical self — not only in your grooming and dress but with your workspace, accessories, tools, and equipment.

As a podcast guest one time, I signed on early to check a few details with the host. Shocked, I watched as he stood up and walked back to the closet near his PC and began to change shirts. Without missing a beat in our conversation, he unzipped his pants, tucked in his shirttail, tossed the dirty shirt over the closet door, and returned to his PC to welcome other guests to our session.

With Zoom now a permanent part of our work lives, we've gained a small glimpse into the homes of many of our colleagues. Before virtual backgrounds became so common, we watched people crunching a spreadsheet from their closet. We saw presenters peering into their laptop perched atop books stacked on washing machines in the laundry room. Other colleagues came to us from a tiny chair crammed in front of shelves in the corner of their bedroom.

During a crisis, creative people do the best way they can. But barring such emergencies that restrict our freedom, we also know that packaging and preparation can pay off handsomely.

When someone walks into your area, cubicle, or office, does it say, "A competent, confident person works here"? Or does it scream, "The person working here is overwhelmed, harried, behind schedule, disorganized, and incapable"?

## Your "Packaging" Includes Your Workspace, Tools, and Equipment

Consider each item: Coffee cups, business cards, marketing materials, reception area, walls, whiteboards, electronic gadgets, software, photos, furniture (desk, chair, rugs, art, lamps). Do you have to dig through piles of gimme pens to find one that will write?

Are you giving out business cards bearing the address of your office before you relocated seven months ago? Does your wall look like a collage of photos from the local frat house party? Does

What about the furniture itself and the way it's arranged? Does it say you're the main show or that you prefer and welcome conversation? Does it present you in the best light? Does it help or hinder you each day as you interact with people to deliver results?

Think of it like this: You call a plumber and you expect him or her to have the right tools in the truck or van to do the job. When that's not the case, you suspect that plumber doesn't stay too busy and that maybe you've called the wrong person or company for the job. People make the same assessments about your competence as they look at your tools and workspace.

As with a favorite blanket or sweater that's been washed one too many times, familiarity can desensitize you to the reaction of others when they first enter your world. Take a fresh look around you. Time spent organizing paperwork, or even your digital desktop, can pay off when it comes to perception of your professional presence.

## **Your Preparation in a Flexible Work Arrangement?**

First impressions fade slowly, if ever. You may have heard it said in politics: "If you're explaining, you're losing." True. If you catch yourself working from a place that looks like it might have been Custer's last stand, you'll feel the urge to explain to the muckety-mucks who walk by that you didn't create the mess — that the piles, the garbage, or the leftover food doesn't belong to you.

They won't hear it. The visual overpowers your words.

It's time for a talk with the guilty. Either that or refuse to nest where the squatter has left his or her squalor.

And if you still have the luxury of your *own* space, consider what your accessories and workspace say about you. Whether clean, organized, and clutter-free — or dirty, disheveled, disorganized — they probably communicate more than you realize about your personal brand, professionalism, and competence.



## Dianna Booher

Dianna Booher is the bestselling author of 49 books, published in 62 foreign-language editions. She helps organizations to communicate clearly and leaders to expand their influence by a strong executive presence — and often by their own published book. Her latest books include *Faster, Fewer, Better Emails; Communicate Like a Leader; What MORE Can I Say?; Creating Personal Presence; and Communicate With Confidence*. National Media such as Good Morning America, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street*

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