A super-personal service

A great receptionist will thrive on a busy front desk, always remembering names and faces, and be in their element interacting with new people, says Glenys Bridges

Along with the ability to complete routine reception duties, there are a further range of innate traits, which make a good receptionist, a great receptionist. Most of the people who enjoy the busy hustle of a reception role are “people-people”, who thrive on the rich mixture of people they interact with day to day. However, most of the best receptionists have one notable aptitude in common; the ability to remember the names and faces of the huge numbers of people they meet.

Never forget a face
Psychologists at Harvard University in Boston have looked into this further to find out why some people more than others will remember faces. The research I’m talking about is published in Psychonomic Bulletin and Review, and was led by Richard Russell, a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Psychology at Harvard, co-authors Ken Nakayama, Edgar Pierce Professor of Psychology at Harvard, and Brad Duchene of the University College London. The research that produced these findings involved conducting standardised face recognition tests. The research results show that rather than people being “good” or “bad” at remembering faces; the range of skills are much greater and span from “super recognition” to “face blindness”.

In the group named as “super-recognition”, people could easily remember the face of someone they met in passing, even many years later. Their research findings acknowledge a vast range in people’s ability to recognise others by their face. At the extremes, they confirmed previous research which found that around two per cent fall into possessing what they called “face blindness”, because they have great difficulty in recognising faces. For the first time, this new research shows at the other end of the scale that others excel in face recognition, indicating that the trait could be on a spectrum, with face blindness on the low end and super-recognition at the high end, opening new and different ways to think about face-recognition ability, and possibly even other aspects of perception, in terms of a spectrum of abilities, rather than there being normal and disordered ability.

Hiding their talent
Super-recognitionists report that they recognise other people far more often than they are recognised. For this reason, some of these people told researchers that they often compensate by pretending not to recognise someone they met in passing, so as to avoid appearing to attribute undue importance to a fleeting encounter. At times, they were able to recognise a person who was shopping in the same shop with them two months ago, even if they didn’t speak to the person. It doesn’t have to be a significant interaction; they really stand out in terms of their ability to remember the people who were actually less significant.

Irrespective of whether you have been fortunate enough to be born with super people-recogni- tion skills, taking an active in interest in people and making them feel important is something every receptionist should aim to do. As practice makes perfect with all types of skills, maybe it is possible with some effort to elevate yourself to super-recognition status. Who knows? It’s worth a try.

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