

Life Skills 101

What gesture often follows the reassuring words, “Trust me”? A smile, of course. It’s the social cue we bring along to every interview, the additional encouragement we add to words like, “Well, what do you think?” We’ll even use it to get the attention of a child.

Smiling can be the subject of serious study, as in Manzini, Sadrieh, and Vriend’s “On Smiles, Winks, and Handshakes as Co-ordination Devices,” published by the Economics Department of the University of London. And in the words of America’s most famous salesman, Arthur Miller’s Willie Loman, “It’s not what you do...It’s who you know and the smile on your face.” But a smile is both an instinctive reaction and a learned response—and that can be a problem.

So, how good are you at distinguishing between the rehearsed and the real smile? Can you tell when you

are being worked and when you have made an impression?

On the BBCi online Science Page, The Human Mind, there’s an interesting test of your ability to judge others’ smiles. The test is called “Spot the Fake Smiles,” and it’s at www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/mind/surveys/smiles/. Designed by a University of California psychologist, Paul Ekman, the test has 20 short flash films of smiling faces. You’re asked to distinguish the fake from the friendly.

But is it important to be able to sort out the smiles, winks, and handshakes? Just remember Willie’s description of a success: “He’s a man way out there in the blue riding on a smile and a shoeshine.” And don’t forget the caveat from that other playwright, who said, “All the world’s a stage.” That would make us all, at least part-time, actors. ■

