

Anatomy of a Smile

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You've just gotten your picture taken for your driver's license. If you're like most of us, your expression is akin to the look one has after eating Aunt Edna's meat pie. You really want to gag, but being the polite nephew you are, you simply smile when she asks you, "Is it good?"

There are different kinds of smiles. The smile probably evolved to help save lives or manipulate others. Besides a genuine enjoyment smile, other smiles are social signals. Many are intended to mask true feelings. A "masking" smile is easy to display, but a genuine enjoyment smile is incredibly difficult to fake.



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Studies of stroke victims can help us understand the anatomy of a smile. Victims who've suffered damage to their motor cortex can't produce a smile when requested to, but--surprisingly--smile easily when they hear a good joke. On the other hand, stroke victims who've suffered damage to the more deep-seated part of the brain called the basal ganglia can smile when asked, but they can't smile in response to a joke--even if they think it's funny. These facts point to the conclusion that there are actually two largely independent circuits in the brain that control smiles. One of them is under the conscious control of the cerebral cortex, the part of the brain related to voluntary movement. The other circuit is associated with the unconscious and is governed by the deep, primitive brain structures that are connected to our emotions. This latter circuit involves the basal ganglia which, when activated, cause spontaneous and involuntary contractions of the muscles around the mouth and eyes.

The secret for detecting a real smile, then, is to look for contractions of the orbicularis oculi muscles around the eyes. Their action gives us our "twinkle." So, in a sense, we do smile with our eyes. Perhaps this insight inspired the song "Irish Eyes Are Smiling." Studies have also found that such smiles are infectious. When we see someone with a genuine enjoyment smile, it makes us feel so good that we may respond with our own genuine smile. Further, the more we exhibit our own genuine smiles, the better we make ourselves feel. So, there is a circular cause and effect: we smile because we're happy, and we're happy because we smile.

Perhaps the secret behind honest versus faked smiles is at work when we photograph people. A genuine smile elicits a sense of well-being and enjoyment in the viewer. A fake smile won't produce the same response. Could this one difference be a factor in the reason we choose one picture over another? And, is this what determines which portraits of smiling subjects become truly successful? Why does one portrait continue to give pleasure over time, while another quickly loses its appeal?

Test yourself with the following photos. Can you separate the two different "smiling parts" of the brain revealed in the portraits? The pictures are from high school photo shoots. Both the subject and two or three other people identified the fake and real smiles in a series of twenty or more shots. Write down the numbers of the smiles you believe are forced (fake) and then the numbers of the ones that are real. The answers can be found below.



If you're like most people, you did better than chance. The differences between some of the smiles were obvious, but others were very subtle. You may be hard-pressed to tell exactly how they were different, even though you correctly identified the real smile. Somehow you can "feel" the difference. This is because detection and interpretation of a smile often works on a sub-conscious level. Additionally, did

you find yourself smiling back at certain pictures? Scientists believe that this response evolved as a way for our ancestors to help cement important bonds and reduce tensions in times of stress. On the other hand, when we see a "bad" smile, it may actually intensify our feelings of unease. Because we detect a "masking" of true emotions or intent, our anxiety rises as we try to understand what's really being communicated or intended. Is the person lying? Does he intend to hurt us?

This smile factor holds many implications for us as photographers. What does it take to produce a portrait that invokes a smile in the viewer? How do we coax a real smile from our subjects? How do we convince high school boys that their tough-guy sour expressions won't have the effect they want, or that they won't want to be remembered for the effect it actually causes?

Apogee writer Chris Groenhout rarely asks his subjects to smile. "Isn't a false smile one more barrier between the subject's true character and the viewer? If a person's mouth was the main point of interest in a portrait, the point of focus would be on teeth rather than eyes. So don't the eyes tell you much more about a subject's mood and character than the smile (false or genuine) ever can?"

In my experience shooting high school students, I've found that it helps to talk about the subject of smiles, how they're different, and what they communicate. Students are very receptive to the discussion. In addition, I encourage the student subjects to bring a friend with them. I put the friend to work as my assistant. These "assistants" usually become customers after the experience, so their inclusion helps sales, as well. Over the years, I've learned that having assistants can sometimes hinder the smiling process, depending on the identity of the person who comes with the subject. Now I now make suggestions about who the subject should bring.

If you want real expressions from a young man, make sure his parents are not with him. Mom or Dad will keep encouraging Junior to smile--which only increases the tension and insures a lot of fake smiles. I also counsel a young male subject against bringing another young man with him. My experience is that his friend will make fun of his attempts to smile, and boys being boys, the name of the game will become how much can we humiliate the other guy. The subject will try to present a macho expression in a display that's important for the sense of self in adolescent boys. My best shots have happened when a girl friend accompanies the young man. Her presence produces a softening effect. He begins making a noticeable effort to be involved in the picture-taking process, because his girl friend is really getting into it.

Hence, we come to a big difference between boys and girls. Boys generally don't see the value of portraits. It runs counter to who they are or think they are or who they're trying to be. Because of this, we must somehow find a way to bring out the young man beneath his mask. Unfortunately, for many young men, their senior portrait is their last portrait before their wedding. The wedding photos will most likely be the last time they're photographed until they're in middle or old age--if they're ever photographed again. I can't tell you how many times I've encountered a distraught family who, upon the death of an elderly uncle or grandfather, are unable to find a single picture of the man taken after his wedding or military service.

Young women, on the other hand, look upon a photo shoot as a time to show off. The sessions are often twice as long as those with boys, because looking just right is so important. A successful portrait session involving a senior girl will guarantee more business, especially if you make them feel good about themselves and how they look. For a young woman, a good girlfriend is often the best bet for her helper--especially when they agree as far as photos are concerned.

No matter what technique you use to capture the real thing, a smile can make or break a portrait. A false smile hides something of the subject's character and creates a feeling of unease in the viewer. A real smile conveys a portion of the subject's personality and instills a feeling of connectedness to him or her. Experiment with different ideas to help your subjects relax and reveal their true selves. If you do, you'll enjoy more successful portraits and more satisfied customers.

The real smiles are: Figs. 1, 2, 5, 9, 10