

## ACT THEIR AGE

**sweaty** palms. Cracking voice. Using lots of “ums,” “likes” and “you knows.” Feeling a head shorter than everyone else. Or worse yet, feeling two heads taller.

Yes, walking into any business meeting can instantly transport you back to junior high—especially if you’re still young enough to remember junior high in all its Technicolor glory. But no longer is only a grade riding on your performance—this time it’s a client, funding, your public image and perhaps even your entire business.

Being a bit younger than the average entrepreneur, how do you put the age difference behind you and start feeling like a colleague rather than a kid sitting at the grown-ups’ table? “You have to pretend age really doesn’t exist [and] not be intimidated by people who are older than you,” advises Jennifer Kushell, founder of The Young Entrepreneurs Network Inc. and author of *The Young Entrepreneur’s Edge: Using Your Ambition, Independence and Youth to Launch a Successful Business* (Random House, \$12, 800-733-3000). Kushell’s Marina Del Rey, California, company, which she started at age 19, provides an online community for young entrepreneurs. Here’s the 26-year-old business veteran’s advice on how to make age a nonissue:

**Dress the part.** “Make sure you’re as professional as you can be and that you blend in with the people you’re meeting with,” says Kushell. For example, if you’re in the advertising industry, dress fashionably. If you’re a techie, ditch the banker’s suit and bring on the khakis. If you look *really* young, Kushell advises you to bring props like a briefcase and a professional organizer. (You never know; they may actually prove useful.)

**Get some street cred.** Earn references, experience and connections by working with key figures and organizations in your industry.

**Use your youth as an asset.** If the idea of walking into a room

full of 40- and 50-year-olds sets your knees a-quakin’, have no fear. “When you’re younger and you walk into a situation like that, they’re going to be as curious about why you’re there as you are interested to be there,” says Kushell. “Especially when there’s a very big age gap, these people are going to be looking at you and saying ‘Wow, I wish my son or daughter would come to these things.’”

perience than you—just in life in general. Be willing to say “You know more about this than I do. What’s your opinion?” Show them you respect the age difference.”

**Avoid schoolground chitchat.** “Don’t date yourself,” says Kushell. Leave talk about school, your parents or what happened last week on Dawson’s Creek behind when you enter the office.

**Redefine your peer group.**

When you bring up horror stories of your worst client or supplier to your non-entrepreneur friends, their eyes may glaze over before you finish telling your first tale. Instead, consider looking to a bigger circle of acquaintances to find business peers. “Find those people in your peer group who are doing something a little bit different. Then, [look to] your parents’ friends and your family.” When you’ve exhausted those resources, Kushell advises seeking out kindred spirits by joining industry organizations and groups.

While it may seem like you’re jumping through

hoops just to prove you’re as qualified as your elder counterparts, every detail—from business cards and a button-down shirt to your “prop” briefcase—takes you one step closer toward credibility. “If you want to grow a decent-sized business,” says Kushell, “you have to accept the fact that there are going to be a lot of bells and whistles involved.”



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**FITTING IN:** Winning over older colleagues is as simple as acting the part, says 26-year-old Jennifer Kushell.

If you look genuinely interested in being there and you present yourself properly, [your age] can actually be an advantage.”

**Get bossy.** If you’re still in college or even in your 20s, your employees are probably going to be older than you. How to win their respect? Show your respect for them, says Kushell. “They are older. They’ve had more ex-