



Smooth Operators

IN BUSINESS, IMAGE IS EVERYTHING, SO YOU'VE GOT TO BE ABLE TO WALK THE WALK AND TALK THE TALK IF YOU WANT TO MAKE IT BIG. LOUISA DEASEY BRAVES THE MAKEOVER.

IN THE NEW ERA OF CASUAL FRIDAYS, international video conferences and Jessica Simpson ringtones, it's hard to know what could boost you up the corporate ladder, and what could be sabotaging your rise to success. But there is help out there.

Individuals and companies from around the globe are paying big bucks for image consultants to enhance personal grooming, body language techniques and understandings of cultural etiquette, to help reach success in their professional and personal life.

Amanda Curren, an Adelaide-based image consultant who has assisted many companies with style overhauls, says the image consultancy industry is important these days because, "Etiquette and grooming were once something you learnt during school, but now the basics aren't commonsense to most people."

Image consultants claim that non-verbal communication tools such as clothing and body language can influence the success of a business, because the way potential clients perceive employees influences the way a product or service is ultimately judged. So, the CEO who leaves his Target tag sticking out, or the receptionist with bleached hair and dark roots, can negatively impact on a company's image.

And in the world of super-speedy global business, being familiar with cultural protocols, such as how to shake a foreigner's hand, can be the ingredient that makes or breaks a deal.

The booming image consulting industry hasn't been officially audited since the early 1990s, but if you flick through the Yellow Pages, you'll find about 20 different companies professing to offer image renovations.

The prices for image overhauls vary as widely as the experience and services of the companies who offer them.

At the top end of the market is the multi-million-dollar firm, Image Group International. They extend on Trinny and Susannah's advice in *What Not to Wear*, by teaching media strategies and life planning skills, as well as wardrobe selection techniques. Image Group International's CEO, Jon Michail, claims he has worked with well-known political clients (though he isn't allowed to name them), as well as with Oprah Winfrey and John Travolta's teams.

Recently, many CEOs have cottoned on to the fact that if they want their brands to be as well-known as the Oprahs of this world, they need to start investing in the image of their employees. And they can see that this is an investment bound to offer returns.

Michail says: "It costs between \$50,000 and \$100,000 a year to employ a personal public relations representative – why not teach people to do it themselves?"

Michail and his team arrange corporate "branding" packages in the Asia-Pacific region and the US, for high-flying clients such as Hewlett-Packard, Microsoft, Mercedes-Benz and ANZ. They teach staff everything from how to conduct a business lunch in another country, to how people can use accessories such as pens and briefcases to communicate a message.

Image consultants teach strategies that actors and moviemakers have known for eons: if you look the part, people will believe you fit the part. Every little detail – from the objects in your office, to the way you walk – affects your ability to pull off a certain role.

Helen Robinett, who runs the Melbourne-based consulting group, Image Quest, says the main reason image consulting is so successful in increasing business revenue is because people who feel good about themselves perform at much higher levels.

"You see people walking taller as they look better, changing their body language, treating themselves with more value and respect." ►

EXTREME MAKEOVERS

Hillary Clinton

As a feminist hippie from way back, Hillary wouldn't cut her hair or wear a suit until a team of consultants convinced her it would be a vital step for her husband to win the presidential election.

Crown Princess Mary

When this Aussie Cinderella left her job as a real-estate agent in Tassie, for a party life in Sydney, she employed an image consultant. After losing 10 kilos, her lycra miniskirts, and her Tassie twang, she gained a Prince. Our Mary also won the hearts of the Danes by becoming fluent in their tongue, on a consultant's suggestion.

Winona Ryder

The suits and schoolgirl-headband Winona wore to her trials for shoplifting not only helped her avoid being sentenced to prison – she even managed to snap up a million-dollar Marc Jacobs modelling contract, which poked fun at the charges.

Kylie Minogue

Who can explain Kylie's 360-degree turnaround from permed *Neighbours* starlet to international A-list celebrity and gay icon? From clever pairings with ex-boyfriend Michael Hutchence and creative partner Nick Cave, to her famous gold hotpants, Kylie is an image consultant's greatest achievement.

John Howard

Have you ever noticed our PM looking a bit flustered? We haven't either. When public speaking, he rarely puts a foot wrong, and it's been reported that he organises vertically challenged speakers to 'warm up' the audience, so that he appears tall.

Steve Vizard

Vizard's transformation from lawyer to media personality and TV host has been credited to an image consultant, not to mention his smooth escape from what could ruin anybody: accusations of fraud.

Michail agrees, stating that businesses that undertake image consulting also benefit from higher staff retention rates: "When staff feel good about themselves they stick around longer."

And it's clear that image consulting benefits businesses in other ways, as the newly polished employee becomes a walking, talking 'branding strategy' for the company. Employees start dressing well, speaking success, looking people in the eye with confidence, and knowing how to order entrees for a team of Japanese businessmen.

So, image consulting can enhance the way a company is represented publicly, but what can it offer the individual, or the ambitious small-business owner?

Terri Scheer, CEO of Terri Scheer Insurance, who was nominated for the Telstra Small Business of the Year Award, was already enjoying success when she sought Amanda Curren's help, though she says, "I wanted to make the most of these opportunities – and that meant looking the part."

Curren assisted Scheer for four months, particularly working on her wardrobe strategy for media appearances, and Scheer testifies, "for what I invested I received 10 times back". With a net worth of over two million dollars, her company has been listed in *BRW Fast 100* – a list of the top 100 fastest growing companies in Australia – not once, but twice. And Scheer believes the financial benefits she has received from media exposure are because she 'looks the part'.

But is our self-worth really so dependent on something as superficial as the outer-shell?

Image Group International's John Michail believes that the average person doesn't understand the impact that personal image can have on every aspect of their life.

"We need to embrace the fact that personal presentation will open doors for us if it's done effectively."

Michail tells the success story of a young nursing student who went from just scraping by, to a salary of more than \$100,000, just by changing her body language.

"From working on something as simple as opening her mouth when she smiled, she began to land jobs and promotions... I always say I don't create the rules, I just teach people what they are." ▶



Our Kylie in her *Neighbours* days, and (right) a much slicker version.



From feminist hippie (left) to one of the most powerful women in the world: Hillary Clinton.

TIPS FROM THE TOP

(Taken from Clare Maxfield's *Getting Corporate*, Ibis Publishing, RRP \$14.95)

COLOURS

Black can make you seem mysterious, firm and cosmopolitan, but it shouldn't be worn if you want people to open up to you.

White helps you appear clean and hygienic, but when worn inappropriately, it can make you seem clinical, uninteresting and bland. **Red** will make you stand out from the crowd, so don't wear it if you want to stay in the background.

Blue is the most favoured colour in the world as it helps you to appear scrupulous and dependable.

Brown is helpful for making people open up to you, but people aspiring to management positions shouldn't wear it.

Orange should never be worn for business of any kind (unless it's a small accessory), as it can make you look cheap.

Grey projects innovation and works well with other strong colours, but don't wear it on its own in creative professions.

RESTAURANTS

- If you drop an eating implement on the floor, leave it there.
- When drinking white, you hold the glass by the stem, but when drinking red wine, you should hold the bowl of the glass.

- If you have invited someone out to lunch for the first time, it's courteous to pay the bill.
- Don't take a sip from your glass when you're the object of a toast.
- Bread should always be placed to your left and cutlery should always be used from the outside first, working inwards for each course.

CULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS

Asia

- Never write on a business card in front of a person.
- Be sure to always introduce the most senior person first.
- When using the assistance of an interpreter while conducting business, it's important to direct your speech towards the person you're meeting with, rather than towards the interpreter.

Japan

- The thumb gesture that signals 'okay' in Australia means 'money' to the Japanese, so use it carefully.
- Try not to start discussing business for at least 15 minutes after a meeting has started.

China

- Bow or nod for an initial greeting and wait for the handshake.
- The most senior person should enter the room first.

Taiwan

- As a personal space rule, keep a distance of about two arm lengths.

Britain

- 'How do you do' is a greeting, and shouldn't be confused with a question.
- Business cards are usually presented at the close of the meeting.

USA

- Dates are written month/day/year instead of day/month/year.
- Drinking is not as common in the US as it is in Australian culture, so don't be surprised if alcohol isn't complimentary at evening functions.

Canada

- Never arrive more than 15 minutes late for a dinner invitation.

New Zealand

- New Zealanders are used to being celebrated with dinners and social functions when they begin a new job.

Corporate Golf Days

- Whether it's a private course, or a public course, always wear a collared shirt and trousers made from wool, cotton or moleskin. Never wear jeans.
- Take a change of clothes for dinner or drinks at the clubhouse.
- It's expected that the team that plays together stays together for at least one or two drinks. It's a huge snub not to share a drink with your team.



As part of a strategy to advance her career, Viivu Padden, a 36-year-old relationship manager for HSBC, employed Clare Maxfield, an image consultant and author of three books on etiquette and grooming. Padden said: "People make their decisions based on who they talk to. I thought, what's going to differentiate us? Me."

Padden was conscious that all her favourite celebrities had great stylists, so she employed Maxfield to instruct her on grooming and wardrobe 'rules', such as the right colours to wear in particular situations. A year later, her salary has increased and she finished 2005 as one of the top-five relationship managers.

Milo Rasinac, a real-estate partner with Nelson Alexander, saw employing Helen Robinett of Image Quest as "an investment, pure and simple".

It cost him about \$2,000 to learn basic grooming techniques and wardrobe strategies for himself and 15 of his sales

staff. Rasinac believes the results more than returned the investment.

Though his image 'package' was a relatively small one – staff were individually advised on colours that suited them, and given grooming tips such as 'no facial hair' and 'aftershave but not buckets of it' – Rasinac says the results were phenomenal.

"We were all looking at each other with new eyes... and if we're noticing it, imagine what the clients are thinking."

Despite the simplicity of the makeover, in sales, looking good can seal the deal.

"In our industry, 90 per cent of the time the vendor will choose their agent based on feeling comfortable with them, and when you've got an agent knocking on your door and they don't look right, it could be the end of your business."

So, while it's true that what's on the inside is what counts, great packaging makes people sit up and take note. ■