

Groom for improvement

In an intense job market men are realising that the image they present is vital and they need professional help to get it right. Liz Hollis discusses what women have known for a long time

With 20,000 redundancies forecast in the City this year, competition for jobs is as fierce as the battle for a sun lounger on a Caribbean beach. It will be no consolation to job-seekers to hear that prospective employers can take just seven seconds to weigh them up for that all-important new post. First impressions are everything – still.

To make the most of those moments, many City workers are turning to professional image consultants. Men from all tiers of business and industry are realising what women have known for years: paying attention to appearance can pay huge dividends – professionally and financially. Image is something you can alter in your favour, if you know how.

"The whole face of our industry is changing as more and more men opt to have their image assessed by a professional," says Polly Holman, president of the Federation of Image Consultants, the industry's trade body.

"The new flexible job market means that we all have to sell ourselves, women and men alike. And men are discovering that having their image assessed isn't the pink, fluffy women-only thing they thought it was a few years ago.

"Paying attention to image has become a necessity rather than an indulgence. I often see the reverse process at work where men are held back in their professional lives, despite working hard and having talent, because they are poorly groomed and badly dressed." Scuffed shoes count.



Karen James, director of Faces Plus, says the way male celebrities dress is also having an impact. "High-profile men like Jamie Theakston and Jamie Oliver are dressing well and making it seem like the thing to do – so everybody else wants to follow."

Martyn Roberts, 38, head of the payroll department for a large corporation and a restaurateur, saw James. "I had changed jobs and needed a new image," he says. "She sorted my wardrobe into sections: business, casual and formal. Next, she weeded out clothes that I no longer wore or that didn't suit me, such as a 25-year-old pair of jeans that I couldn't even get into.

"I did own more than 140 shirts, for example, but she whittled it down to 100. She also advised me to have shorter hair and to stay groomed. I would never have considered plucking out the odd stray eyebrow before, but now I realise it's crucial for that well-groomed look."

Good grooming "can give you such an

advantage in the jobs market that hundreds of men are now flocking to professional image consultants to smarten up their act and help them make an impact in those crucial first seconds," says Kent-based consultant Tessa Carmen. Keith Clark, 46, a London-based senior project manager, saw her.

"My wife had had her image done and I thought, 'Why not?', I'll have mine evaluated as well. I am 6ft 1in with a high waistline and now realise I look best in double-breasted suits, which make me look broader and less tall. I now know that I need to wear gold metal-framed or tortoiseshell glasses because silver doesn't suit my colouring.

"Tessa also put together a swatch of my best colours and fabric weaves to help when I go shopping. I suit a heavier weave of fabric, so now look for this in suits. One of the main benefits is that shopping is so much easier and quicker now because I know what I'm looking for."

Colour is crucial, too: wearing the right colour can make you look younger and healthier. Colour Me Beautiful has a network of UK consultants that can pinpoint exactly what shades and tones suit an individual's colouring. House of Colour also has image consultants across the UK. It offers a day course especially for men, costing £150.

"During the day men learn about colour analysis, the rules of dress, budgeting, the language of clothes, authority dressing and clothing personality," says director Christine Windsor. "Most of all, they learn that they can have control of the messages they want to give."

The origin of these messages dates back to medieval Sumptuary Law, which decreed the clothes each rank and title of citizen were allowed to wear. Clothes gave away status instantly. They still do.

"We're no longer aware of it, but the vestige of this is that there are subtle signals that convey your business rank," says Windsor. "A cheap suit and accessories lower your status while a good pen, briefcase or watch increase them. A darker colour is instantly more serious and formal."

Also, the man's suit originated in the military uniform, and subtleties such as cut and the quality of the fabric showed higher status. Lower-ranking "soldiers" wear cheaper, mass-produced suits, while "generals" wear hand-tailored, beautifully cut suits in the finest fabric.

"If you want to increase your status, you have to follow these types of subtle signals," says Windsor. "We are an increasingly visual culture. A suit, for example, is no longer something you just wear to work. The cut, colour and detail, everything about it, says something about who you are and where you want to go in business."

"The way men dress in the workplace is loaded with meaning and there is now a whole language of clothes that men need to learn."

"If you're a salesman, for example, your clothes have a huge impact on your success. A black or dark suit with a white shirt is too contrasting and has the effect of making you seem distant and formal. But soften down the colour to a medium grey and wear a shirt and tie with less contrast, and you'll seem instantly more friendly and approachable."

And if you want to get promoted, Karen James recommends dressing for the position you desire. "Look at how men dress at the level where you want to be promoted to. Whether they wear Jermyn Street ties or Marks and Spencer, do the same yourself," she says.

■ *Colour Me Beautiful, in the UK: 020-7627 5211, www.colourmebeautiful.co.uk; in the US: +1 800-Colorme, www.colormebeautiful.com; Faces Plus: tel/fax: 01603-622653, www.facesplus.co.uk; Federation of Image Consultants: 07010-701018, www.tifc.org.uk; House of Colour: 0800-318526, www.houseofcolour.co.uk; Tessa Carmen: 01622-861188.*

The consultants: Christine Windsor and Lynn Elvy from House of Colour (left). Getting it right: Jamie Oliver and Jamie Theakston (below). Getting it wrong: Dustin Hoffman as Willy Loman (bottom left)

Photography: Kobal, PA



HOW NOT TO BE WILLY LOMAN

- Details count: choose accessories - watch, briefcase, shoes, diary - carefully. Never carry disposable pens.
- Match suit colour to the image you want to present. Black makes you seem distant but highly authoritative. Blue and grey are professional but approachable. Camel is friendly, but very casual.
- Avoid brightly coloured or "fun" socks.
- Don't skimp on quality of your shirt and tie - this is what people notice and judge you by most. Shirts should be best-quality cotton. Ties should be bias-cut silk and lined. Ensure the width of your tie balances with the width of your suit lapels.
- Avoid short-sleeved shirts. Roll up long sleeves if you have to.
- Maintain a capsule City wardrobe: at least six suits (a different one each day), 10 shirts (three of which are in white or cream, seven striped or coloured shirts), and 10 ties.
- Groom. Pluck out stray nostril hairs and eyebrows. Have your teeth whitened or repaired if necessary. Cleanse and moisturise skin daily.

