

Fine-tuning your corporate image - includes related articles on nonverbal communication and business attire

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Think about it. Who do you know that always looks terrific, whose voice commands attention and who never seems flustered, no matter how important the presentation may be? Sure, some of us seem to be born with style and polish, but if you're like most professionals, a little help from an image professional can go a very long way in helping advance your career.

As businesses continue to shrink staff size and compress layers of management, companies are catapulting administrative and technical professionals into positions of increased responsibility and exposure, often with little or no formal preparation. For these newly minted managers, gaining access to the executive suite is only half the challenge. In this highly competitive environment, staying there is getting harder every day. Face it, doing a good job is not enough. Today, you've got to look and act the part--exuding style, competence and authority--to ensure that your meteoric ascent up the corporate ladder doesn't end in a crash landing.

Corporations and nonprofit agencies have a vested interest in having polished executives represent the organization in the marketplace, on the fund-raising trail and in the media. That's why enhancing the image of managers is viewed as a bottom-line investment. Corporate leaders must command attention and respect from colleagues and clients. The millions that corporations spend each year for management training and development, career seminars, tuition reimbursement and fitness training demonstrates the value corporate America places on prepared, articulate and well-groomed executives.

Why Your Corporate Image Counts

"Your image is like the weather," observes Marilyn Mondejar, founder and executive director of the San Francisco-based Image Industry Council International (IICI), a 4-year-old trade association of nearly 1,000 image development enterprises, with aggregate annual sales of \$500 million. "People notice when it is extremely good or extremely bad." Mondejar, also president of Mondejar Associates & Image Consultants in the same city, counts Apple Computer, Security Pacific National Bank and Hartford Insurance Co. among her clients.

Your image is your reputation and is a reflection of how you are perceived by others, either through your conversation, appearance or written words. When the image you project is in sync with your firm's corporate culture, you'll find yourself standing on much surer footing. However, a persona not in keeping with protocol reflects poorly on you, your superiors and ultimately your company.

A positive public image encompasses a lot more than just knowing not to wear brown shoes with a blue suit. Indeed, it is a way of life in which your wardrobe style, voice intonation, grooming habits, etiquette, office decor, body language and business presentations, oral and written, denote a style of performance commensurate with success.

"People use image as a gauge of how well you've adapted to the corporate culture and how well you understand philosophy and values of the company," explains Joyce E. A. Russel, Ph. D., an associate professor of management at the College of Business at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, who specializes in organizational behavior and human resources management. "If you don't look and act the part, you will probably be denied opportunities."

A myriad of interpersonal skills factor into an individual's corporate image. Proper etiquette, whether on the telephone, at dinner or when introducing colleagues is extremely important in business and social settings. While generally not an issue for professionals firmly entrenched in their careers, it is often the lack of these skills that impedes the progress of aspiring middle managers and may result in career derailment.

Accomplished executives have long known the merits of enlisting the aid of image consultants. Helping professionals refine their style is what the business of image consulting is all about. It is not, its proponents emphasize, about making you into something you're

not. Rather, a good consultant will teach you how to feel comfortable with your inner self and to project confidence and authority. "A consultant analyzes a client's needs by examining his or her lifestyle, occupation and daily schedule," says Cynthia Moody, president of Personal Expressions Inc., an image consulting firm in New York City. "Individuals need to feel comfortable with their image in order to project it in the right way."

The image consulting industry is a small, but lucrative one, says Jennifer Maxwell Morris, the 37-year-old president of Look Consulting International and founding president of the Association of Image Consultants International (AICI), both based in New York City. AICI's estimated 700 members command salaries ranging from \$25 to \$500 per hour, with prices adjusted by the services rendered, status of the client and experience of the consultant. Beyond the normal wardrobe consultation, consultants can provide a variety of other services, including personal shopping, grooming and cosmetic advice, coaching on speech and presentation skills, and media training. Some consultants, like Rhonda Peterson, even offer nutrition and fitness counseling, "so you project a look-good, feel-good attitude." The 31-year-old president of New York City-based Nouveau Image Inc. has serviced members of the National Black MBA Association, among others.

When It's Time to Call In The Pros

Colleagues are rarely willing to advise one another on personal appearance or inappropriate manners. So, how are you to know if your image needs sprucing up? Armelda Byrd, a Chicago image consultant, who is president and creative director of a firm bearing her name advises: "One tip-off that you don't have the right image is being excluded from high-profile meetings, even when you know your performance is up to par, and you should have been included."

"As you move into positions of increased authority you become very aware of how you present yourself," says Zella Edwards-Elizenberry, a program manager in the artificial intelligence area at the Maynard, Mass.-based Digital Equipment Corp. Now in her early 40s, Edwards-Elizenberry sought out consultants' services early on in her career and has subsequently advanced through a series of technical positions, each with higher degrees of managerial responsibility. "An astute individual takes notice of how other people prepare for

and communicate at meetings and presentations," adds Edwards-Elizenberry. In fact, she explains, part of your strategy should be to closely monitor those in your company who have the type of position you want. Watch what they wear and note their communication style. Then, if you feel comfortable doing so, seek to emulate, but not imitate them.

"Having the right look won't close the deal, but it can win the opening argument," says Cheryl Blackwell Bryson, a partner at the Chicago offices of Rivkin, Radler & Kremer law firm. Bryson initially sought out the services of image consultant Armelda Byrd in 1986, after the birth of her second child. "I'd decided that I wasn't going to buy another garment that wouldn't make me look at least 10 pounds thinner," recalls the 39-year-old labor and employment attorney. "That's when I knew I needed professional help."

Bryson was so pleased with the results that she encouraged her husband, James, a 44-year-old physical engineer and section manager at Inland Steel to consult Byrd for a much-needed wardrobe consultation and personal shopping assistance. "He recently was promoted," says his wife, "and I think the consultation had something to do with it. His colleagues now have more of a sense that he's in charge."

Maisha Bennett, Ph.D., president and executive director of Hamilton Behavioral Healthcare Ltd. in Chicago, first used an image consultant back in 1985. Then Chicago's deputy commissioner of health, Bennett was asked to be spokesperson for a new media health campaign, but was cautioned by an associate to hire an image consultant first. "I was initially insulted because I thought I looked and presented myself just fine," she says in retrospect. However, Bennett, 43, took her friend's advice, since television interviews and formal presentations would now be an integral aspect of her job. After the success of that campaign, Bennett admits to not relying solely on her image consultant for all her personal appearance and shopping needs.

Given the standard five seconds it takes a person to make a visual first assessment of you, most experts agree that your appearance exudes a powerful message. Jean E. Patton, a 44-year-old president of New York-based Second Skin Color and Cosmetics and coauthor of *Color to Color: The Black Woman's Guide to a Rainbow of Fashion and Beauty* (Simon & Schuster, New York, \$13) notes that black managers face enough barriers to upward

mobility without having to contend with their appearance being one of them, "Make the effort to look the way any successful executive looks--effective!" she advises.

Signing On To The Team

As though as it may be, putting together the right look is often the easiest part of the image enhancement process. "The hardest part is mastering the communication skills, which will ultimately have more impact on your promotability," says John W. Aldrich, 52, president of Aldrich Associates, a training and development firm in Shelton, Conn.

Employees who are slow to pick up on their company's culture will soon begin to pay the price, warns Aldrich, who estimates that he has worked with over 2,000 executives on organizational and managerial effectiveness through his three-day Workshop for Black Managers. "An indication of trouble is when people stop inviting you to meetings or they won't cooperate with you," he says. "You may find you're not getting much feedback from your boss or not getting meaningful assignments. Organizations have their own ways of communicating that you're not fitting in."

Many a frustrated manager has learned that confidence in their ability and respect for their authority is not a natural byproduct of a job title. Rather, they are rewards that must be earned and then reinforced through the ongoing upgrading of your personal presentation. Chicago image consultant Armelda Byrd, 38, who counts the Miller Brewing Co. and McDonald's Corp. among her clients, recommends that executives periodically evaluate their career progress, while measuring the caliber of their personal effectiveness against that action plan. "Being self-assured in your appearance and execution can get you through the rough spots in many stressful situations," she advises.

But what if you're coming across as cocky when you mean to seem confident? You'll figure that out fairly quickly, says Byrd. "Over-confidence will invite hostile responses," she warns. "Learn to distinguish between a take-charge and a takeover mentality."

Monitoring the behavior of office veterans can also provide clues to acceptable behavior within your corporation, counsels management consultant John Aldrich. "Do people call each

other by their first names? Do they tell jokes? Picking up on their style can serve as a guide," he says.

Murvin Lackey, vice president of purchasing at Digital Equipment Corp. in Maynard, Mass., has been promoted seven times during his 12 years with the company and acknowledges having taken numerous personal development courses throughout his career. Now in his late 40s, Lackey notes that the importance vested in a manager's ability to inspire trust and respect escalates as he ascends the corporate ladder. He also warns African-American managers that they may be held to a higher level of scrutiny than their white counterparts: "Blacks have to prove themselves for admission to the inner circles of corporate America. Whites have to disprove themselves to be kicked out."

Some aspects of corporate protocol can be particularly sensitive and bear watching. "Physically touching someone can be dangerous behavior for both women and older men," cautions the IICI's Marily Mondejar. A woman stroking a male colleague's arm may be interpreted as a sexual advance, while a similar gesture from an older man can be perceived as being aggressive or condescending. And considering the multicultural nature of today's work force and the heightened awareness of sexual harassment issues, it's best that most physical contact with business associates be restricted to a firm, quick handshake.

Rounding Out The Image Package

The right clothes, presentation and attitude go a long way to ensure that most of your first impressions will be great ones. However, innocuous details, though easily overlooked, can sabotage what would otherwise be considered an impressive image package.

It goes without saying that good grooming habits (proper hygiene, styled hair, shined shoes, manicured nails) are requisite. Other image tips:

* Put the same confidence, conviction and authority you've placed in your presentation into the voice that will convey it. Mumbling, whispering, stuttering or bellowing your point will distract attention from the message and from the effectiveness of the messenger.

* Invest in classic, quality accessories such as a briefcase, trench coat/overcoat, watch, pen and daily planner. These items suffer considerable wear and tear, so they should be purchased with longevity in mind.

* Like your home, your office (or desk) decor reflects your style and level of professionalism. Personal items and decorating touches provide clues to aspects of your personality and lifestyle. And contrary to a popular school of thought, consistent clutter is not an indication of a busy executive--it's just an indication of clutter.

* Clunky jewelry, garish makeup and over-powering cologne speak volumes without your ever saying a word. Moderation is the key in these areas.

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