

Image Consultants Tutor on the Substance of Style

By Sharene Azimi

If you've ever wished that the Fab Five from "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" could work their style magic on you, just click your heels and say these two words: image consultant.

The devastatingly hip men from the Bravo series won't appear on your doorstep, but you may find one of the 86 members of the New York chapter of the Association of Image Consultants International.

Image consultants go beyond offering fashion and grooming tips, according to Carol Davidson, vice president of membership for AICI in the NY/Tri-State area.

"We are teaching people how to use nonverbal clues for communication," she said. "We develop an image action plan."

Davidson said the AICI — its Web site is www.aici.org — is concerned with professionalizing the relatively young field of image con-

sulting, which includes style, color and wardrobe consultants; media trainers; career coaches; cosmetics and skin-care specialists; hair stylists, and etiquette experts.

The Clothes Make the Man

Michelle Sterling received her Certificate of Image Consulting from AICI and has run her own business, Global Image Group, for two years.

Sterling described her typical clients as men and women in their 30s who "have successful careers but haven't had time to work on their personal lives." Often, they come to

her to improve their success at dating.

A male client who recently completed Global Image Group's online Visual Style Assessment received the following advice: "Based on the photos you sent us, we recommend a wardrobe update that is more appealing to women." According to the assessment, for social and dating situations the man would do well to project his "Romantic Style," described in the company's materials as "a 'Great Gatsby' softened quality," with his "Traditional Style," characterized as "conservative, tailored."

Sterling recommended he use his "Sporty Style" to enhance the "Traditional Style" for work situations only.

"When you first get that criticism, it bites a little," said Lee Aundra Temescu, 35, who received a Visual Style Assessment from Sterling. But then, she said, she realized Sterling was "absolutely right."

Temescu, who coaches executives on public speak-

ing, said she now recommends style analysis to her clients. Men, in particular, benefit from the service, she said.

Although the trend for "business casual" attire is beginning to wane in New York, where suits are making a comeback, it's still going strong in Southern California, where Temescu now lives. The trouble, she suggested, is that men often can't figure out what business casual is, and fail to realize how much appearance matters in gaining credibility.

"This whole battle of 'style over substance' is a false dichotomy," Temescu said, noting that the philosopher Plato thought that it was words that were important, while the orator Cicero understood that delivery mattered. "You have to have both," she said.

Beryl Wing, a former actress and now the president of the local AICI chapter, agrees with Temescu that the whole business casual trend has caused a crisis in dress. But Wing said it is women, not men, who are most in need of her services.

Men know how to dress for work because they started developing a business costume in 1600, she said. They've continued to use a jacket because "it works, it says 'listen.'"

Women, on the other hand, entered the workforce in significant numbers only in the late 19th century, when the "Gibson girl" look of white blouse and dark skirt became a de facto uniform. Today, women make the mistake of forgoing professional attire for items such as sheer blouses and open-backed shoes — items that project a "social image," Wing said.

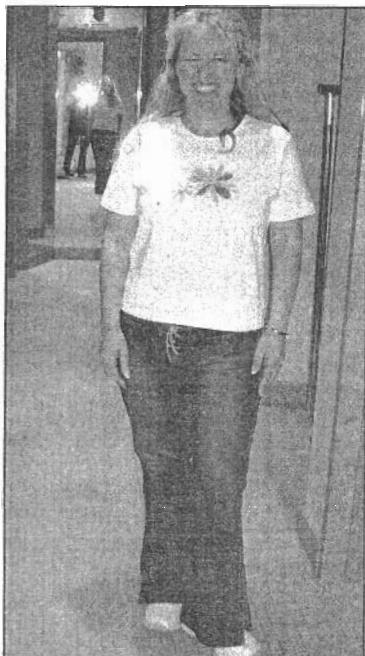
A Brand New You

In its broadest sense, image consulting is about helping people develop a consistent way of presenting themselves that projects

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The final product: "Weekend Wear" gives Rose a new look.



Debby Rose before her consultation with Global Image Group.

who they are while helping them get what they want. Viewed another way, it's about packaging people as "brands."

"I consider myself a brand," said Wing. "Before I leave the house in the morning, I think of who I'm meeting and I make sure all of my clothes and accessories are consistent, that they convey the message I want to give."

Sterling echoed that view, explaining that creating an "authentic" brand identity requires matching your lifestyle, goals and objectives with the way you dress, speak, even write an email.

The associate director of the Center on Global Brand Leadership at Columbia University, David Rogers, said seeing individuals as brands is important for sports celebrities such as Michael Jordan or star businesspeople like Jack Welch. But for the average person, he said, branding should be seen as a metaphor.

A recent book Rogers wrote with Columbia Business School Professor Bernd Schmitt and Karen Vrotsos, "There's No Business That's Not Show Business," describes how to use "show biz" techniques for differentiating a brand.

"I wouldn't look to brand management as the best source of ideas for building strong relationships with people," Rogers said. "It's more when you're trying to reach an audience and introduce yourself to people who don't know you well."

Mirror, Mirror

To better understand how it feels to have one's style "assessed," this reporter completed Global Image Group's online survey (at www.globalimagegrp.com). Apparently, she's projecting a "Sporty" image that doesn't quite measure up to the sophisticated lady she imagines herself to be. Note to self: Take time to blow dry hair in the morning.

Fortunately, the adventuresome, independent and artistic aspects of her personality are, Sterling says, attractive to men.

All this aspiring Lois Lane has to do to increase her impact in both the professional and personal spheres is — drum roll please — incorporate more of her "Dramatic Style" into her wardrobe.

Considering that the first step to getting the look is to "Assemble a core wardrobe in black," and this is New York, she should be appearing more dramatic any day now. ■