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Personal Business; Deal Makers Don't Wear Plaid (Well, Maybe Warren Buffett Can)

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A young doctor from Silicon Valley is seeking respect. A fine-rug dealer in Houston wants to impress clients and a professor in Manhattan hopes to establish himself in his new career. These men have joined the quiet swell of professionals enlisting image consultants, who help them project a fashionable, affluent presence that does not tip into slick.

In some circles, shabbiness can be as grave a business transgression as licking the knife at a power lunch. To avoid the stigma, people from executives to entrepreneurs to everyday Joes are seeking coaching in the art of dapper dress. Tutelage covers shopping assistance, house calls to examine the contents of closets -- smelly sneakers and all -- and suggestions for skin care, hair products, eyeglasses and sock length.

Fees range from \$125 an hour to \$2,000 a day -- and that is before a subject buys his first pair of lace-ups.

Greg Janicik, 38, the Manhattan professor, says he sought help this winter as he navigated a transition to consulting. With a Ph.D. in managerial and organizational behavior, Mr. Janicik is no cerebral slouch, but says he was stumped at what to wear. At the behest of an image consultant, he streamlined his closet, spent \$3,000 on clothes and ditched his glasses for contacts or frameless specs. "You have one shot to make an impression," Mr. Janicik said. "Clothes are a big part of that."

Used to be, only the rich and fabulous indulged, and more often than not, it was women not men. But television hits like Bravo's "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" and de rigueur reimagining on morning news programs and the daytime talk circuit are edging wardrobe consultants toward the mainstream, and men, in particular. For Jane Friedman, president and chief executive of HarperCollins Publishers, the significance of apt dress cannot be overstated.

"It is extremely important to be appropriate for interviews and meetings," said Ms. Friedman, who uses a personal shopper, "and if someone is inappropriately dressed, of course, it reflects on who they are. If they are going to be hired for a decision-making post, I would question that in my own mind."

Most high-end department stores offer free personal shoppers, but they limit their advice to the goods sold by the stores that employ them, whereas independent wardrobe consultants provide a wider spectrum of services.

Jeff Hill, a 50-year-old investment adviser in suburban Houston, who shifted his business to focus on wealthy individuals, said he hated to shop but thought prospects would take him more seriously with a better wardrobe. He contacted Jennifer Lauren, an image consultant, who went through his closet and assembled outfits. She tossed out little.

"She told me I had better taste than the average guy she works with," he said in a telephone interview, a touch of pride in his voice.

Still, this month, Mr. Hill and Ms. Lauren went to Banana Republic, where Mr. Hill spent two hours and \$700 on trousers, shirts and garments for work and leisure. "I understand the value of advice," he said. "People can do their own investments, and I guess you could try to do your own surgery, but I'd rather pay a doctor."

Spring and fall are especially frenetic times for image consultants as fashion greenhorns switch out their closets and shop for the next season. Summer has novices scrambling to strike the right tone in business casual or to freshen up tropical-weight suits.

Despite today's unabashed self-pampering, many acolytes publicly embrace image consultants with the enthusiasm of entering a 12-step program.

"Men are very hush-hush about it," said Elena Castaneda, an image and fashion consultant in Manhattan, adding that shows like "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" are "bringing image consultants and stylists out of the closet."

That may be so, but the Silicon Valley doctor seeking respect still felt uncomfortable giving his name, though he did allow a visitor to witness a recent image consultation. Because he is young, 34, and an anesthesiologist, his motivation for a makeover was straightforward: he said he did not want to be mistaken for an intern.

He did a Web search and found Ms. Castaneda, and he flew across the country to visit her.

She met him in his room at the Mercer Hotel in SoHo. She quickly sized him up, taking inventory as she stood him in front of a full-length mirror. He stood curious at the impending transformation.

"You should smile more often," she said. "Your smile is your calling card. It says 'I'm happy, approachable.' Marla Maples taught herself to smile even when she was ordering a hot dog," Ms. Castaneda said, suggesting Crest Whitestrips for a brighter smile.

She stared at his eyebrows and said he was fortunate not to have the unibrow that afflicts many men. Waxing therefore was unnecessary, but a strategic tweeze could help, she said.

A different haircut would be more flattering, she said, cropping his hair with her hands to show what she meant. She told him how to make the most of shoulders, pointed out that his trousers were too baggy, and explained that less billowy sleeves would make his arms appear longer.

To his chagrin, he heard that his new \$850 Loro Piana linen trousers had to go. A fine brand but too roomy, she explained.

Same concept with Brioni -- a high-quality label that is not cut for him. So Ms. Castaneda and her client headed to Madison Avenue and went shopping at Barneys New York.

They were in the market for a spring wardrobe that was classic yet cool enough for a bachelor finally done with 27 years of schooling.

At first, he could not tell if new trousers fit him or if he even liked them. Six hours and \$8,000 in merchandise later, he said he was confident enough to select his own ties. Ms. Castaneda's \$1,600-a-day rate was a bargain, he said, considering the bad purchases she had prevented.

"I know I needed help," he said. "People who see me at work probably know it, but it's nice to give the illusion that I've figured it out myself."

Alan Taghdisi, the rug dealer who divides his time between Houston and New York, has worked with an image guru for three years. Sometimes they shop together. Other times, he dispatches her solo.

"It doesn't mean you're gay," Mr. Taghdisi, 25, said. "It's like any consultant. People hire consultants to manage their companies. It doesn't mean they don't know what they're doing. They just need a little help."

Style consultants can be found online and through references from boutiques and high-end department stores. Most advise men and women.

"Businesswomen don't have the time to shop," said Debra Lindquist, a consultant in Denver. "They want to be more efficient. They don't want to spend hours shopping, and they need a guide. Men are coming, too. They are buying things but want to make sure there is some rhyme or reason to their overall wardrobe plan."

Dr. Anouk Stein, for example, hired Ms. Castaneda after celebrating her 43rd birthday and in the midst of a career change from Manhattan radiologist to Phoenix medical consultant. Ms. Castaneda went through her closet, relegated 20 percent to the dust bin and teamed orphan pieces into chic ensembles. Soon Dr. Stein said she was wearing her Hermès scarves as belts and jazzing up dowdy suits with snappy separates.

"I had seen all these TV shows with people who had completely changed how they looked without any surgery, and they looked so much younger and better by the clothes they wore," she said. "I was spending a lot of money on clothes, and I didn't look a whole lot better than when I wasn't spending a lot."

Photo: Jennifer Lauren, an image consultant, goes over some clothing choices with Jeff Hill, a 50-year-old investment adviser in suburban Houston. "I understand the value of advice," he said. (Photo by Carlos Javier Sanchez for The New York Times)

Chart: "EVEN THE FASHION-CHALLENGED CAN LOOK SHARP WITH A FEW TIPS FROM WARDROBE CONSULTANTS"

MEN

WEAR SOCKS that extend to the knee to prevent skin from being exposed when legs are crossed.

BE MINDFUL when nose and ear hair should be trimmed.

KEEP SHIRTS tucked in, even polos.

ONLY DRY CLEAN suits, trousers and sweaters once or twice a year to avoid damage from harsh chemicals.

PRESS TROUSERS to keep them tidy.

BUY COTTON UNDERSHIRTS one size smaller than you would normally to wear under open-collar shirts so they will hug the neck.

WOMEN

STYLE LONG HAIR so that it does not need to be touched, flipped or fiddled with.

KEEP JEWELRY MINIMAL, especially when worn with busy patterns or fabrics. Wear one ring on each hand unless it is part of an engagement-wedding ring combination.

MAKE SURE BRAS FIT. Just because they may be the right size does not mean they are the correct fit. Wear hosiery that blends with the shoe and hemline.

ENSURE SHORT SKIRTS are not too short and that they allow the wearer to sit with dignity.