

## **You've got the look?**

### **The secrets to looking the part in the court of sartorial opinion**

#### **Does Patrick Fitzgerald look frumpy on purpose?**



Anna Soo Wildermuth helps clients like Marquette University Law School student Andy Bridgman choose just the right tie. Photo: John R. Boehm

Anna Soo Wildermuth thinks so. The ill-fitting suits, the thin ties, the wrinkled dress shirts. They all send the message, "I won't hurt you," says Ms. Wildermuth, an Elmhurst-based image consultant. For U.S. Attorney Fitzgerald, a prosecutor who's trying to get mid-level employees to open up about the misdeeds of their superiors, it's all part of his disarming repertoire. "It makes you feel as though you can trust him she says.

New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, on the other hand, looks polished and put together. When tangling with slick corporate titans in New York, he needs to send the message, "I am not afraid of you. I am going to get you," says Ms. Wildermuth, 58.

Most lawyers underestimate the value of assessing their image. It isn't until a boss or client complains about their style — or lack thereof — that they turn to firms like Ms. Wildermuth's Personal Images Inc. for a diagnosis.

For \$250 to \$350 an hour, Ms. Wildermuth uses her 18 years of experience to help lawyers match their clothing to their message. And it's not just about getting them to stop wearing lime green with fuchsia. She also coaches them on word choice and maintaining eye contact with a client — especially when they're nervous.

#### **ONE GOOD SUIT**

The most common fashion faux pas male lawyers make is mismatching their style with their field of practice. Patent lawyers, who are notoriously subdued, often err by wearing low-key clothing, Ms. Wildermuth says. As a result, they barely register with clients. To win new clients, retain old ones and influence both, "they have to compensate with more daring colors and sharper shirts," she says.

Lawyers who are naturally outgoing, like litigators and corporate dealmakers, often make the opposite mistake by wearing flashy clothing or fancy watches that exaggerate their personality. "They need to tone it down by wearing a white shirt instead of blue one or a tie with a smaller pattern," Ms. Wildermuth says.

Rainmakers and senior partners transcend these rules, she finds. Like Donald Trump, their look often says, "No one tells me what to do."

Says Ms. Wildermuth, "If you come across a senior partner whose clothing shouts out at you, don't tangle with them — especially the ones wearing aviator glasses." That kind of eyewear, favored by police officers, tends to be sported by those who demand respect and punish those who don't grovel accordingly.

But whatever approach men decide to take, they should have at least one good suit in their closet that costs between \$650 and \$1,200 for court appearances and meeting with clients.

### **'DO MY SOCKS MATCH?'**

Ms. Wildermuth tries to deter her female clients from large or flashy jewelry. Buying trendy clothing can also backfire. "There are a lot of red, pink and yellow purses out now. Don't do it," she says.

Women just starting out should avoid the cookie-cutter lawyer's uniform: a conservative suit, white blouse and pearls. They'll never stand out. Conversely, they should avoid wearing red. "I'm a big proponent of dark burgundy, but red is way over the top," she says.

Once their fashion choices are under control, Ms. Wildermuth also analyzes her clients' communication style and etiquette. Talking too quickly can turn off their clients. So can talking too slowly, if a client moves at a fast pace.

The key is for them to mirror their clients, even down to word choice. "If a client says 'I have a home in the mountains,' don't ask them, 'How is your cabin?'" Ms. Wildermuth says.

Eye contact is also important. "Many lawyers make the mistake of looking away before they've finished their introduction. It makes them look anxious," she says.

To correct that, Ms. Wildermuth interviews her clients on videotape, asking them a mix of hardball and softball questions. When she asks them a tough question about their clients, they become nervous and look away. But when she asks them about their favorite book, they look relaxed. The goal: to have that relaxed look when answering the tough questions.

Michael Chu, a Chicago patent lawyer, hired Ms. Wildermuth to speak at the National Asian Pacific American Bar Assn.'s annual meeting in 2004. At first, the lawyers attending the event were tentative and stuck to generalities, Mr. Chu says. But before her presentation was over, their questions became personal. They wanted to know if flashy ties and double-breasted suits were acceptable. One audience member finally broke down and asked her, "Do my socks match my outfit?"