



An image-maker that fits

By Lisa Bertagnoli

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Just as women with money have portfolio consultants to help them track their wealth and invest wisely, women with wardrobes — serious wardrobes, on which they may spend hundreds of thousands of dollars a year — hire image consultants to help them manage their clothes and spend wisely.

Beyond shopping, image consultants help clients keep track of what they wear, and to what events. Consultants will ask a designer who else has purchased a certain dress, ensuring their client doesn't see her "twin" at a social event.

These advisers arm themselves with copies of their clients' social and corporate schedules. And, of course, they shop, too, making sure to snap up exclusive pieces — and the finest of the season's sales — for their clients.

For them and women of all budgets, an ever-growing army of professionals is on hand to help with wardrobe management, from simple personal shoppers to the psychiatrist-like image consultants, whose mission is to make sure a client's appearance accurately reflects who she is. The Assn. of Image Consultants International, an Iowa-based trade group that trains and certifies consultants, claims 1,200 members, up from 500 five years ago. The Chicago chapter now boasts 75 members, up from 30 three years ago.

Why can't we dress ourselves?

"There are so many styles, so many pieces out there," says Anna Wildermuth of Personal Images, an Elmhurst-based consulting firm. "And there aren't icons anymore, like Audrey (Hepburn) or Jackie (Onassis)."

Other consultants point to what may be a collective collapse of sartorial confidence and know-how.

Clients "have such low self-esteem," says Nancy Plummer, president and principal of Fine Threads Inc., a Chicago-based image-consulting firm. Several times, new clients have led her to expect a wardrobe disaster, "but the fix wasn't as hard as I thought it was going to be," she says.

Other times, she's assisted new college grads who, reared in the days of business casual, "think their nice Gap jeans are okay for an interview," Ms. Plummer says.

More consultants mean a mind-boggling array of services and prices. On one end of the spectrum are personal shoppers: time-savers who charge \$40 or so an hour to hit the sales racks for busy clients. On the other end: consultants who act almost like therapists, probing clients' inner selves for keys to the best look for them. And their fees can be extraordinary. Mark Gill, a Chicago-area image consultant who has been in business for seven years, charges \$25,000 per style season for his services.

The crowded market has resulted in image-consulting experiences that range from "oh, wow" to "oh, no." Clients have found themselves in colors that don't work with their skin tones and clothes that don't fit their body types. Personal Images' Ms. Wildermuth worked with a client whose former stylist dressed her in "wrong styles and wrong colors." The client had an unusual shape to begin with, Ms. Wildermuth says, and her look was a "walking disaster."

Another common misstep is a "cookie-cutter" wardrobe that looks good on paper (black suit, white shirt,

expensive bag) but doesn't fit a client's lifestyle.

Oh, and there's the occasional case of fraud, too, with stylists taking money to buy apparel and then skipping out.

"You can tell" when women start working with an image consultant: "The hair is cut a different way, the teeth are whiter," says Sue Kramer, president of Peace of Mind Virtual Assistance LLC, a company that places executive assistants, in Clarendon Hills.

When Ms. Kramer, 42, started her own company four years ago, she sought advice from two friends who are professional consultants. Their free counsel resulted in "a huge transformation" for a work wardrobe that once consisted of pleated Dockers and baggy sweaters: "I was the only person who didn't know that pleats make you look heavy," she says.

Now her closet is filled with "more feminine but more professional" items such as a gray-green tweed swing jacket, which she pairs with a black skirt or flat-front black pants. "Now my clothes are extremely tailored," she says.

This year, she plans to hire her consultant friends to help increase her wardrobe vitality. "As I'm growing as a professional, I want my image to be better."

But to Ms. Kramer's eye, many newly styled women she sees at conferences "look too corporate cookie-cutter," with dark suits and a splash of color in a blouse or scarf. "We're not all the same, and I wish that's what image consultants would stay away from."

A BAD CHOICE, THEN A GOOD ONE

Donna Sims Wilson, executive vice-president and head of the Chicago office of M. R. Beal & Co., a New York-based investment firm, is confident in her sense of style yet has worked with two image consultants; Mr. Gill is currently helping her prepare for a major career change that will give her a more public role. "I need someone to take me to the next level," she says.

Eight years ago, Ms. Wilson worked with another consultant who helped her prepare for several media events, including a photo shoot. The stylist "definitely had an eye," and Ms. Wilson was pleased with her work.

However, when she gave the stylist \$5,000 to shop for her, the stylist "disappeared" with the money.

Recently, Ms. Wilson ran into the stylist at Bloomingdale's. "We had an interesting conversation," she reports, though she hasn't gotten her money back. (Usually, clients authorize stylists to use their credit cards, or keep their card number on file at their favorite clothing stores.)

Friends referred Ms. Wilson to Mr. Gill, who began their relationship with an "in-depth interview" about her life and career goals. After the interview, Mr. Gill discarded most of Ms. Wilson's wardrobe, replacing it with pieces from designers such as Fendi, Prada and Giambattista Valli. Her new wardrobe expands her palette to steel blue, burgundy and chocolate brown from its black-and-tan basics. It includes deep V-necks and portrait collars to show off her elegant neck and contoured jackets to set off her waist.

The result? Ms. Wilson is spending more money on clothes, but feels the payback is there. "It's a confidence thing," she says.

"I'm an African-American woman in Corporate America, and I need to look the part when I show up."

NO MEETING OF THE MINDS

Chicago resident Beverly Wender also has worked with Mr. Gill, but feels a bit differently about the experience. She hired him five years ago to overhaul her closet. While skilled, Mr. Gill "was very name-driven," says Ms. Wender, a senior sales manager with CitiMortgage, a division of New York-based Citigroup Inc. "He wanted me to spend \$1,000 on a pair of pants. . . .

He said, 'You have to go to Jil Sander, you have to shop on Oak Street.' "

Ms. Wender, who paid Mr. Gill about \$3,000, says he also urged her into "sassy" clothes. "I don't go out clubbing, so I don't need sassy clothes," she says.

Mr. Gill's response? Expensive clothes "are about quality and craftsmanship," he says. "Prada and Jil Sander last. It's investment dressing." As for the "sassy" clothes: "I saw a piece of her personality. . . . I wanted to allow her to be free and comfortable with herself," he says.

Ms. Wender now works with wardrobe consultant Jen Ottoson, owner of Edgewater-based Truly Styled. The two women are friends, which at first made Ms.

Wender a bit wary of working with Ms. Ottoson. "I said, 'You're my friend, I like you, but what makes you skilled to do this?'"

Ms. Wender "tested" Ms. Ottoson with a closet-cleaning, a staple of image consultants. Ms. Wender tried on every item of clothing while Ms. Ottoson passed judgment: "She said, 'Bev, you can't wear that,' but she wasn't insulting," Ms. Wender recalls.

Since hiring Ms. Ottoson 2½ years ago, Ms. Wender has paid her about \$400, at \$40 per hour, for personal shopping services. Ms. Ottoson shops at stores ranging from Nordstrom to Kohl's to Target, and "she's spot-on," Ms. Wender says. One outfit in particular, a coral jacket and cream pants worn when Ms. Wender did a business presentation at a conference in Florida, won raves from her colleagues.

Working with Ms. Ottoson also gives Ms. Wender a psychological lift: "You walk out the door feeling great and confident. You can't put a price tag on having a great day."

That lift might be the biggest benefit of image consulting.

"There's definitely a relationship need," says Jim Wetzel, co-owner of Jake, an upscale boutique with three Chicago-area locations. "It's like a personal trainer. . . . It's someone who's focused on you, and you pay them and they fuss over you for three or four hours."

That relationship can be very powerful: Mr. Wetzel says he's seen shoppers buy unflattering outfits on the advice of consultants.



Beverly Wender, a senior sales manager at CitiMortgage, wanted help with her wardrobe without a push to buy pricey designer clothes. She hired a friend — after testing her skills. Photo: Lisa Predko

One woman, he recalls, tried on evening dresses for a date to the Grammy Awards. After trying on several slinky numbers, "she was uncomfortable, you could tell," Mr. Wetzel says.

Though a more conservative gown looked great on her, he says, the woman declined to buy it because it didn't fit her image consultant's advice.

Mr. Wetzel understands her decision. "You're paying someone to give you this information, and if you don't listen, you're throwing money away."

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