

# The Principles of Good Packaging

Working with an image consultant can help you save time and stay ahead of the latest fashion trends. Here's how.



**M**en's clothes are all over the bed — not strewn, but carefully arranged by color and fabric into a series of smart combinations. Their owner is standing in front of his closet, staring at a tie that he has just acknowledged is not a winner.

And still the woman standing with him is not satisfied. She says she needs him to understand why the tie doesn't work. The man hedges, but soon agrees with her explanation: the tie is "comical."

The discussion is bitter medicine, but it's also just what the man bargained for. The clothes, tie included, belong to Chicago attorney and real estate agent Jeff Kropp, who has hired image consultant Robin Walker to help him reinvent his wardrobe. Consultants like Walker see clothing as a means to create an image for their clients.

"I just apply the principles of good packaging. It's just branding a particular person," Walker says. "Anything well packaged is half sold."

## Keeping Up With the Latest

The image consulting industry encompasses training in etiquette and communication skills in addition to wardrobe and style advice. Clothing is the anchor component, because it's an easy external tool that can make a dramatic difference, says Karen Brunger, international president of the Des Moines, Ia.-based Association of Image Consultants International (AICI). The AICI certifies members through exams and peer review; the idea is to convey that image consulting isn't based just on opinion.

Walker travels to Italy twice a year for fashion trade shows and follows the advice of the Color Association in New York. She's a certified AICI member. And for jet-setting clients who travel extensively or keep second homes, she keeps tabs on local fashion trends in places ranging from Aspen, Colo. to Moscow, Russia. She also keeps track of which articles of clothing are kept at clients' various resi-



dences, so she can recommend the perfect ensemble for a special event.

When her clients are dressing for a big meeting or state dinner, Walker feels as invested as her clients. It's her version of the red carpet scrutiny at the Oscars. But she doesn't get to attend the events, so she relies on feedback. The big payoff comes through compliments, like when former president Bill Clinton remarked on one of her client's shirts.

### **Creating a Personal "Brand"**

The key to coming up with the right look is applying timeless style principles to the needs and body type of a particular client, then drawing on the latest fashions from New York and Milan as appropriate. By combining an exhaustive knowledge of the trends coming to market with an emphasis on staple colors and styles that help define a client's fashion "brand" over time, image consultants have an advantage over personal shoppers.

Image consultants can charge anywhere from \$80 per hour for an inexperienced consultant up to several hundred for the top executive consultants, according to Brunger. Walker's rate is \$225 per hour. "People pay for honesty," says Walker. "It's 'Don't

hold back: why isn't this going the way I want it to?'" Some clients ask her for more detail than others, though, such as the fashion trend behind a color choice, or the reasons she chooses certain fabrics or patterns. Walker hosts a monthly conference call where guest speakers discuss image and style. But for the majority of her clientele, it's the results that matter. "All they want to know is that it's a new season, new clothes are coming and they will be in your closet in three weeks."

And it's all confidential: her discussions with clients stay, well, in the closet.

### **Curve Appeal**

Walker is fairly gentle in her critique of Kropp's wardrobe. She pulls out a couple of shirts she likes, then waves toward a section of shirts that won't make the cut. "You've transcended some of the things in your closet," she says.

She lays out some ground rules based on Kropp's body type, complexion and career: she'll start him on a basic diet of three colors, charcoal, blue and khaki, with cordovan accessories. He should always wear at least three layers, and he should wear collared shirts, because the angles will complement his round



## GETTING STARTED

Here are some tips to help you dress like you're already under the tutelage of a professional image consultant:

- **Be consistent.** "People don't need 15 wardrobes," says Chicago image consultant Robin Walker. "You want to nail down some colors to form a backbone for your wardrobe. It's very inconsistent to have a huge range of colors. People want to know what they're getting from you."
- **Pay attention to fabric and cut.** "Many people sabotage themselves at the quality level," says Karen Brunger, international president of Image Consultants Association International (AICI.org) and director of the International Image Institute ([imageinstitute.com](http://imageinstitute.com)). "Higher quality fabric has a more refined look, and when you put it with the right cut, it just makes the body look good. It's not so much the brand name, but the right fabric and workmanship. You can get a really amazing image that way."
- **Have a goal.** Walker says she can quickly put an outfit together for any occasion, from a dinner party in Dubai to a shareholder meeting. But shopping for deals or for stuff that's "cool" isn't her style.

face. "When you've got a lot of curve, it comes across as soft," says Walker. "Friendly, but not powerful."

"This is boggling my mind a little bit," says Kropp. He likens the makeover to a Web site redesign, and says he only has a couple of seconds to make a strong first impression. At the end of the initial session with Walker, he's ready to entrust her with bringing him some core pieces like shirts, pants and a sport coat to build a wardrobe around. She'll have them custom-made, so the second meeting with Kropp will involve a detailed set of measurements.

Walker says, "It doesn't matter to me where the clothes come from. The point is that my clients need them, and custom is the easiest way to get it in and have it be exactly what they need it to be."

The good news is that Kropp already owns some charcoal and khaki pants, as well as several blue shirts — a few of which stand up to Walker's scrutiny. Still, there's a lot to be done, and Kropp turns a little melancholy at the thought of retiring so much of his wardrobe. He reminds himself that he's doing this to enhance his image. Walker just smiles: "As soon as he puts on some of the stuff we talked about and somebody gives him a compliment, it'll be a whole different story." ■