

OPENING REMARKS Ideas and opinions

All This Stuff About Image

In the world of business, clothes make the woman.

BY NEILA DUNAY FISHER

I SUPPOSE IN A WAY my first feelings on the subject of image started on an up escalator in Saks Fifth Avenue. I had just been "collared" (I believe that's proper police jargon) by the Saks security guard, simply because I was hanging around the dressing rooms of the plaza department and taking copious notes. Well, I was on assignment for a local magazine at the time, and my assignment was truly to hang out at those dressing rooms and listen in on what the wealthy women of the area were saying about fashion (the owner/publisher thought that would be really cute!).

Just as I was overhearing some noteworthy comments about how these very same ladies resented the pushy salespeople, whom they wouldn't trust for anything, and how they felt that none of these salespeople could even put an outfit together (the age of separates was dawning, at least in the fashion magazines)—just as it was beginning to get interesting—security kindly suggested that I bring my notes and pencils upstairs, where I could leisurely explain to the manager of the store exactly what I was doing there.

As we lazily glided toward my fashionable fate, I saw a very very large lady perched on a stool in the hat department. She had a very small hat planted upon her head and was gazing intently into a hand mirror that was being held by a salesperson. As the escalator moved past this vignette, the

salesperson was saying "that's to die for," fashion language for the living end or, simply stated, "you've got to have it, it's so you."

With those sugarplum words dancing in my head, I spent two hours with an understanding Saks manager, talking about what women in 1973 really needed from the world of fashion. The work force was just beginning to place demands on women and appropriate wardrobes were needed: five-day working wardrobes, charity-luncheon wardrobes, or even just being-with-baby-and-going-to-school-conference wardrobes. It was no longer a "pretty dress" society. Women of the seventies

needed clothes that worked for their lifestyles. It was the dawn of the interview suit and the five-day, mix-and-match wardrobe. Appropriateness was the qualification and budget was the control. Remember, it was only the early seventies. She was not yet a member of the board where quality could tend to push budgets out of sight, and power shoulder pads were way in the future, along with de-suiting.

So on that afternoon in 1973, the manager and I talked about putting clothes together and helping women who no longer had the time to shop leisurely, or women who lacked the confidence to mix and match with flare. They couldn't just

combine shirt, skirt, jacket, belt, earrings, hose, and shoes in a look that would be individual as well as correct. These women sensed that they didn't want a rubber stamp look that a salesperson could easily put together from one designer. Nobody wants to see someone across the room in the same outfit . . . a fact from time *in memorium*.

And so began personal shopping in the east. Instead of having me arrested for dressing room something or other, the manager hired me to try this new idea of putting wardrobes together.

We began with a tiny area on the main floor of the luxury suburban store. Within this area we set up a tiny boutique with grid walls, where we could hang clothing that was coordinated as outfits: a jacket that worked with three skirts, three blouses, two belts, and some jewelry. A set of clothes that became perhaps 10 looks. In other words, a wardrobe.

Our department was special in that we could take a customer around the store, utilizing every department that she needed, from belts to shoes. For the first time, we could carry a skirt along with us to match the color to a blouse, and not just guess if it would work. We could truly coordinate everything, and, best of all, we used a special dressing room where the customer could try on everything at once to see the total look. It worked. Did it ever.

We followed it up with a presentation called "Fashions on a Hanger," which featured these same coordinated outfits hung on hangers with the accessories in place. We took the show



Women, clothing, and careers: The days of mix-and-match skirtsuits are gone.

STEVE SARTORI

to country clubs and women's groups, stating that it was easier for them to identify their own image this way than on a six-foot, 90-pound model gliding down a runway at a luncheon where the audience has just been served cream sauce and baked Alaska.

Those beginnings of personal shopping paved the way for "image," which was complicated enough to demand the creation of a whole new industry, now called image consulting.

IN TRYING TO DEFINE as elusive a word as image, we have to understand why we need an image at all. It probably begins with being over-qualified.

All of us are so over-educated, over-prepared, and so ready to do our best, but the competition is fierce. All of a sudden your M.A. isn't enough. Your Ph.D. is a room decoration. You're sitting in a reception room that costs more to decorate than you'll earn in a lifetime. You're there for a job interview. You've even been recommended by a V.P. of the firm, who plays golf with your Uncle Fred. You are distinctly avoiding eye contact with two other young women and a young man whose destinies are obviously linked with yours.

And now it's all too late as you notice that the jacket of your new interview suit gaps at the front when you sit because the button's a bit too tight, and that makes the blouse pop out. Why didn't someone tell you to test sitting down in the darn suit. If you had, perhaps you would have noticed that the straight skirt, while a modest length when standing, rides alarmingly up over the knee while sitting. Leg crossing (your most comfortable position) is now *verboten*. The run in the stockings now seems but a minor detail, especially since the stockings which looked beige in the store seem to have acquired a sort of lilac tint. They call you in for the interview just as your too-large earrings fall off.

Now it's your chance. Here comes the six-second entrance through that mammoth oak doorway, where you'll make your indelible impression. You will not be given a second chance. As you shake hands, try to put on your earring while smoothing your skirt as far over your lilac knee as possi-

ble, and easing into the chair without popping your jacket bottom, you seem to have forgotten not only the name of the firm and the name of your interviewer, but your major and where you took it. Oh well, everyone needs a practice interview.

True story? A bit exaggerated perhaps, but too close for comfort. Even *after* you get the job, your image is on the line. Word has it that in one of those multi-name New York law firms there dwelt a lady partner renowned for her strategy and her incredible research.

other's applause that most of them neglected to offer any other choice other than well-above-the-knee lengths. Well, the fashion magazines applauded. Some editors even took credit for the whole idea and quietly slugged it out in a competition as to who really was first. And so the buyers bought. And bought. The designers and editors said it was the biggest thing since stone-washed denim, so the buyers bought more.

The windows of most of the major stores showed kneecaps (mannequin manufacturers were up

created lunch-hour knee-slimming treatments, not to mention kneecap smoothing and muscle reduction. Hosiery designers got on the bandwagon with shiny, silky, sexy stockings that were just opaque enough to hide those demon spider veins. And then came the shoe designers with the highest of heels to add grace to both calf and ankle. Stockrooms were filled with every color, every fabric, every style of short skirt.

And the stockrooms stayed filled.

And women stayed home.

And women wore pants.

And women said no.

And the skirts were marked down.

And women still said NO.

It was the biggest fashion rebellion in history, and it freed the slaves.

Image? We've come a long way baby. We've found out who we are and nobody's gonna tell us how to cover it. Suggest maybe. Entice, perhaps. Tempt is okay, too. But dictate, no. Not to Two-Suit Mary or any of her sisters in any other fields or lifestyles.

We may only have six seconds to project an image. And we do need help and direction. But we also need the space to say NO.

Women needed clothes that worked for their lifestyles. Appropriateness was the qualification and budget was the control.

Research was her approach to fashion, as well. She studied *Vogue* and *Glamour* and collected a wardrobe of suits. Unfortunately, as was the case that season, the suits all looked alike and she was afraid to be creative. So, the story goes, they soon called her "Two-Suit Mary." As good as she was, the name stuck and became her image.

POOR MARY WAS A VICTIM of the fashion media. A believing follower of anyone who would give her the fashion direction that her law school had neglected to teach.

Something happened to her in the fall of last year. Sort of the October 19th of the fashion industry. We called it the short skirt disaster of 1987.

It went down something like this.

Key fashion designers decided that it was time for short skirts for everyone. They were so delighted with their sketches and with each

nights changing obviously connected knee joints into no-seam perfection). Plastic surgeons



NEILA DUNAY FISHER, one of America's foremost image consultants, has helped hundreds of women to refine and define their wardrobes along with their self image. A partner in the New York City consulting firm, New Image, Fisher has made countless television guest appearances, been featured in magazines, and is co-author of the 1986 bestseller, *It's You!* (Villard Books). A 1960 SU graduate, Fisher entered the fashion world as an advertising agency executive, working on a major women's wear account. She later created personal shopping services for Saks Fifth Avenue and Bergdorf Goodman.