

## **Trading blue jeans for pencil skirt**

### **More and more young people entering work force seek coaching of a different kind - what to wear to the job**

AMY BROWN-BOWERS

Special to The Globe and Mail

July 11, 2007

Third-year commerce and finance student Lindsay Gervais found herself this spring with a coveted summer job lined up - and no idea of what to wear to her first day on the job.

"I have two pairs of pants and a blazer and I didn't know if they fit right or not," recalls the 20-year-old McGill University student. "When it comes to work clothes, I don't even know where to begin."

Rather than seek the advice of friends or a sales clerk, Ms. Gervais, a resident of Seeley's Bay, just north of Kingston, Ont., turned for help to Catherine Bell, founder of Prime Impressions, an image-consulting firm in Kingston.

Two sessions and nearly \$500 later, Ms. Gervais walked away with a binder filled with 465 personalized dressing dos and don'ts to guide her future shopping expeditions.

The guidelines, based on factors including her colouring, body shape, even the slope of her shoulders, cover the gamut of attire, from hosiery to shoes and blazers to blouses, all aimed at fostering a powerful and polished look.

A couple of paycheques into the job, Ms. Gervais was able to put the guidelines to the test, purchasing as her first work outfit a dark-grey pencil skirt, white convertible-collar short-sleeved shirt, cloverleaf-collared blazer and black-needle point shoes.

The look was a winner. When she walked into the Ottawa office of Nasittuq Corp., an Inuit company that maintains the north warning system, "my co-workers noticed it right away," says Ms. Gervais, who is working in the company's accounting and finance department for the summer. "They were like: 'Wow, Lindsay, you look fantastic today.' " Her supervisor told her that she "looked very professional," and "ready to get down to business."

"I felt extremely confident in my purchases and it surprised me that so many people noticed a difference," she says.

Ms. Gervais is one of many students making the transition into the corporate world without the sartorial skills to turn their backpacks into briefcases.

While young people are no strangers to image - after all, they spend much of their teens and early twenties obsessing about it - they have a tough time translating a scruffy student appearance into an effective professional one, image consultants say.

A tendency to dress more casually than their parents did through their university years, along with seeing their professors dress down, has left this generation of graduates in the dark when it comes to proper working wear, Ms. Bell says.

That, along with increased job competition and the popularity of makeover shows, has led to an increase in the number of recent and soon-to-be graduates contacting image consultants for help, industry professionals say.

"Young people today generally dress far more casually than their parents did when they were going to school, so they haven't had experience in dressing for work," she says.

"They are in a period of transition, moving from being a student to a working professional. They know that the clothes that they have been wearing are too casual for their new environment and they aren't sure how to pull together an acceptable working wardrobe."

"A lot of these young people ... actually don't know what's appropriate," adds Denisa Nica, founder of Image Builders, a Vancouver corporate image management firm.

"They've been wearing these t-shirts with the university logo for four years and, suddenly, they come out of university and they have no idea what's going on in the business world."

Both Ms. Bell and Ms. Nica say it's parents who often contact them on behalf of their children.

Ms. Nica started offering workshops and services tailored to young people because there was such high demand from mom and dad.

"Parents are looking for something that's going to give [their kids] that edge. They've just spent all this money on their education and they want them to do well," says Ms. Bell, adding that parents cover her fees a quarter of the time.

Image consultants generally charge \$75 to \$250 an hour; a basic colour analysis - identifying skin undertones and matching them to a palette of colours to wear - can run

from \$150 to \$250. Ms. Bell offers students a 10-per-cent discount and teaches these cash-strapped clients how to make more outfits out of fewer pieces of clothing.

If parents aren't paying, young people are willing to dig into their pockets in hopes of working world payoffs.

One such client, a 24-year-old, contacted Ms. Bell last July. He was about to start a highly competitive sales job at a global information technology firm and wanted help overhauling his wardrobe and professional image.

They did an initial two-hour assessment on the phone and later spent a day together doing further colour and body-type analysis before going on a shopping spree;

He spent \$4,000 for the advice and a new wardrobe, and considers it money well spent. "People have told me I look good. I'm more productive because I'm not worrying about how I look when I meet clients. I know I look good," says the grad. He declined to be named out of embarrassment that he'd needed image help.

It's not that young people aren't aware of clothing and image - they often try to express their personalities primarily through their clothing.

It's that "they go to the extreme," says Deborah Reynolds, president of About Face Image Consulting in Langley, B.C. You never want your clothes - or earrings, hair, makeup, shoes, cleavage or lower-back tattoo - to overshadow your skills and capabilities in an interview or workplace, she says.

Adds Ms. Bell: "Lately, there's an awful lot of cleavage in the workplace ... It's very feminine and it's a fashion trend and it needs to be altered slightly for the workplace ... The more skin you show, the less power you have."

Ms. Reynolds suggests young people ask themselves about their clothing choices: "What is the purpose of my dress? Are these clothes going to take me where I want to go?"

Interviewers, she says, are more likely to hire and promote those who look the part. So she recommends observing the grooming and dress habits of those above you, making note of the tailoring of their clothes, the way their outfits come together, how they style their hair, their accessories, shoes and makeup.

Ms. Gervais says her image makeover has been a boon, even for a summer job. "It really does make a difference. If you can go in there and portray a confident and capable person just with your ... image, it's an asset. It becomes a competitive advantage."

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Sartorial smarts**

Some tips from image consultants for that professional look:

### Invest in the right clothing

"Spend your clothing dollars where you spend your time," Catherine Bell writes in her book *Managing Your Image Potential*. If you will be spending 70 per cent of your time in work clothes, then 70 per cent of your wardrobe should consist of pieces suitable for work.

### Master business casual

"Young people have great trouble with business casual," says Ms. Bell, founder of Prime Impressions. Casual doesn't mean tattered jeans, stubble or not ironing but, rather, slight alterations in a garment's cut, colour, fabric or pattern.

### No short-sleeved shirts

"A short-sleeved dress shirt worn with a tie doesn't project an image of quality." Ms. Bell writes. "A long-sleeved dress shirt is always appropriate. If you're warm, wear a long-sleeved shirt, remove your jacket and roll your sleeves halfway to the elbow."

### Loose the tousled look

While messy and tousled hair works at the bar, it won't work in the office. "Is that going to create trust in a client?" Ms. Bell asks. "A current hairstyle can help you make the transition from student to working professional."

### Cover up

Ms. Bell says women are lately tending to dress much more femininely at work - but at the risk of revealing a too much cleavage. The same rationale would apply to legs, adds Denisa Nica, founder of Image Builders: "Always wear hosiery."

### No low-rise pants

"Women tend to want to wear low-rise pants and they do cover them up usually with a top but when they bend over, their thong or their tattoo shows," Ms. Bell says. Buy clothes that allow you to move around the office with confidence and ease.

### Jackets are powerful pieces

A 1993 study done at the University of Manitoba showed that women wearing jackets were perceived to have more experience and legitimate power than women not wearing jackets.

Don't be down on the heel

"People for some reason associate how one takes care of details with how one takes care of their shoes," Ms. Bell says. "I've heard of companies that actually have somewhere on their evaluation form ... a note surrounding the condition of the shoes." Leave scuffed shoes at home and never ever wear flip-flops, clogs, mules or anything else that makes noise, Ms. Bell says.

A little makeup works

Ms. Bell suggests that young women wear a little bit of makeup to help polish their look. Visit a professional to learn how to correctly apply it in the right places and in the right colours.

Avoid visual distractions

"You don't want your clothes to take over in the interview," says Deborah Reynolds, founder of About Face Image Consulting. Avoid dangly earrings, loud shoes, too much makeup or anything that will distract from what you have to say.

*Amy Brown-Bowers*