

Looking Your Best To Earn Your Best

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There is truth to the saying, "you can't judge a book by its cover" but, in client facing and fiercely competitive professional environments like the real estate & mortgage professions all elements of your professional package play a part in delivering your message and can ultimately be your key to success.

From your marketing strategy to your business plan to your key relationships; one aspect plays a prominent role, at least in terms of perception; your professional image.

Remember high school? Didn't it seem like the pretty girls and the handsome guys always had the most friends? Well real life is not much different. The good news is that if you don't fit society's image of "beautiful", as an adult, there is still hope. It's not vain to value the way you present yourself- it is strategic. Of course, we all know that it is what is inside that really counts, but, the unfortunate truth is that in business particularly, it is often what is presented on the outside that initially extends an invitation - or gives cause to mentally slam the door. Life may not be fair in this way, but it is equal – we can all look our best – whatever we have to work with.

In a relationship driven industry, like the Real Estate and Mortgage professions, where business relationships are built on values, integrity and trust, the decision to consider the relationship often begins much more reactively, which is why image and presentation of self is so critical.

Mihaela Ciocan, President, ImagePro International Institute, communicates the urgency of presenting yourself well: "Image is not everything, just what everyone notices first! Visual appearance accounts for 55% of our communication. Whether we like it or not, image matters, because most of the time, people make assumptions based on limited information. It is not fair, but it is human behaviour at work. The best we can do is make our image work for us and not

against us by never leaving home without looking and feeling like the kind of person we want to be.”

What is image exactly? It is kind of a vague concept, but one that packs significant impact on your bottom line. Kat Neumann, Image Consultant with Confident Image, helps define what needs to be considered; “ Your image is made up of many elements, from the superficial, such as what you are wearing, how your clothes fit, color, accessories, shoes as well as personal hygiene including hair style, grooming, and make up. Your image is also comprised of the way you carry yourself, your attitude and mannerisms.”

Overlooked Business Opportunities

In a business that is fiercely competitive, it seems futile to expend tremendous effort and money on development and implementation of marketing strategy, when your deals could ultimately hinge on how you present yourself when you actually get yourself in front of the client. Recognize that, for all your efforts to control your professional environment , there is an element of human psychology at play and your best bet to win prospective clients is to play into that psychology and know that you can influence the way in which people interact with you.

It is intimidating, but don't shy away from appearance-based judgement. This, like all other levels of your marketing strategy, is an opportunity to win business and an easy way to set yourself apart from the competition. Looking good is not only about dressing well but also about paying attention to the myriad of details that make up the total package. Always remember things like having a clean car, confident air, neatly pressed clothing, polished shoes and top it off with an accessory that never goes out of style, a smile!

Ciocan reminds professionals to go beyond dressing for success when establishing a polished image; "Image is our total success package: visual appearance, verbal/non-verbal communication and social/business etiquette”.

Embrace your inner fashionista as a strategic business partner

Do you think it is time to update or polish your image? Do your kids go into your closet when they are putting together Halloween Costumes? Maybe you don't have time to shave every day or have a manicure every week. Maybe you haven't updated your wardrobe in so long it is coming back in style? Does your fashion sense end at matching socks?

Fear not, there is abundant support available out there. While you may be well aware of the necessity of putting together a polished image, the prospect of doing so can be a little daunting. There are several services out there that offer help in various forms, depending on what you seek.

Consultants and agencies offer services like wardrobe and body analysis, social etiquette, cultural competence, as well as offer advice on media coaching. Similarly, many consultants and higher end stores offer personal shopping services. So not to worry- the mirror in the dressing room is not your only back up.

A little goes a long way too. Even if your image is in dire need of a full overhaul, a little tweak here and there may be all you need to get going- and to get more comfortable with the change.

When Neumann is working with a client who is seeking moderate change, she recommends small steps for big impact; "When I work with such a client, I would teach them about their body type as well as how to dress their body create the image they are looking for. I would develop a plan that lays out cuts of garments that will flatter them most, items they need to purge from their wardrobe and items that I think they should add to their wardrobe. I would teach the client how to shop for their wardrobe needs. The client then could build a new, updated wardrobe at their own pace, working with what they currently have."

Similarly, Ciocan suggests that there are options for professionals who seek change- but at their own comfort level: "Maintaining a current and polished image makes a huge difference. People who want change, but are not ready for a complete makeover, can try a new hairstyle or make-up, and incorporate a few trends (ensuring they work for them); it can be a new colour, an accessory or a styling/design detail."

Being fashionable is important- but presentation of the package has as much to do with how you are perceived.

Don't wear a ball gown to a ball game.

Like the rest of your marketing strategy-know your audience. You don't want to alienate your clients by appearing too formal, or by looking out of place. There are times when a starched shirt and tie- or a designer suit are called for—and there are times that smart casual is the smart move. The rule of thumb is to dress "up" from how you think your market is likely to dress. This will effectively communicate that you are both professional and accessible.

Clarify your Message.

There is a direct cause-effect link here. A large part of your job is about persuasion- convincing clients to choose you, asking for business and closing deals. Additionally, this industry relies heavily on intangibles like integrity and trust- so the things that people can see, like your clothing, your car, your manners- and the way in which you carry yourself generally- are some of the most powerful tools you have at your disposal to acquire and maintain business- they are an extension of the values that you want to communicate-I am reliable; I pay attention to detail; I am excellent at what I do; I am congenial and hard-working- and the list goes on. You communicate confidence. When you speak, people listen.

In short, if people are impressed with what they see on the outside- they are more open to believing that they will like what they find on the inside. Your image establishes your credibility as a professional.

Don't underestimate the impact you can make, says Neumann; "Image plays a very large role in a competitive client-based industry like real estate. As a real estate professional, it is vital to send a message to potential clients that you are competent, successful, knowledgeable and attentive.

You want to instil confidence in your abilities and this can be done, upon first meeting with someone through your image and the way you are dressed and present yourself.”

Your professional image is the ultimate manifestation of your brand. It gives you an opportunity to give it visual reference - and to communicate- in an impacting way that will be received and be remembered.

On the other side of the coin too, one must be acutely aware of possible negative effects of projecting a poor image. If you are wrinkled, unkempt and mismatched, people – wrongly or rightly- will think that you are, at best, not as good as your nearest polished competitor and, at worst, incompetent, disorganized or disinterested.

Non-Verbal Communication

Like all successful relationships, communication is the key to success. Chances are, you have focused a lot of attention on the verbal component of your client relationships- actively soliciting and maintaining business, but you may not have considered what you are saying when you are not speaking.

It is believed that more than half of a message is communicated non-verbally. Clothing and Image are considered a component of this non-verbal communication called “object communication”- and carry as powerful a punch as the spoken word in terms of eliciting judgement from prospective and current clients.

If the objects that clothe and surround you had a voice, what would they say? Is it reflective of your brand, messaging or your work ethic?

Be Yourself

While looking polished is important, so is being comfortable in your own skin. Know your own tastes- and in what kind of environment you flourish. While it is important to be trendy- it is more important to be impacting. Sincere confidence goes a long way, and that will not come through if you are out of your element.

Says Neumann, "It is important to always remember that just because something is trendy, doesn't necessarily mean it is flattering on everyone. It is a good idea to attempt to translate trends into something wearable for your personal body type and lifestyle.”
How are you going to convince people to buy what you are selling, if you are not buying it yourself? Make sure your image fits you- not just the clothing- but the lifestyle and your intended market.

Dressing for success is as much about visualizing as it is about creating a visual; Cultivating an image, believing it, and living it, are all part of laying your stake down in the marketplace.

Zig Ziglar said it best: ” You can’t climb the ladder of success dressed in the costume of failure.”