

# Image NATIONS

FAR FROM BEING SHALLOW AND IMMATERIAL, FASHION, STYLE AND PERSONAL IMAGE CAN HAVE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT BOTH ON YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE.

BY // NORA ELIAS



We've all been raised with the adage, axiom even, that first impressions last. And with the assumption that in a world said to be more obsessed with youth and beauty than ever before, surface appeal must by necessity be important. However, short of assuming that life would be easier and generally just far more pleasant if we looked a little more like we might model for a living and a little less like we, well don't, many of us don't necessarily give that much thought to how our appearance affects our lives, personally or professionally. Or the extent to which we can influence this through the way we dress and present ourselves, circumstances much more easily amended than our genetic pros and cons. Research, however, shows that we should.

"People judge you based on your visual image within 30 seconds of meeting you for the first time," says Dubai based stylist and image consultant Rana Saab. "Seven per cent of their judgement is based on what you have to say, 38 per cent on your tone of voice and the rest on your visual image, body language and attitude." Fellow stylist Ivana Mazic, also based in Dubai, reinforces this view, commenting that "People [often] don't bother to get to know others better, they just judge us based on our sense of style, finding it easier to do that." US based Jill Haney, founder of JH Image Consulting explains that while the aim is not for others to judge us on image alone, what we are trying to do is create an exterior presentable and appealing enough to hold their attention beyond those first few seconds.

"What we're doing is creating interest so that people will give us the time to get to know us better, both in our professional and personal lives," she says. Industry insiders agree that this is not something everyone takes the time or makes the effort to do on a daily basis. "There are a lot of people out there that it doesn't come naturally to or that don't place a value on it. Many people don't know the research or the statistics or think that it's superficial," Haney says. "In a fair world we'd all be given the opportunity for people to get to know us so that we can be judged on who we are and how we do our job, but life is not fair."

That we live in an unfair world where people are prone to making snap judgments about us only reinforces the importance of that talked about first impression, because first impressions may be all we get. "Studies show that when we meet someone for the first time, we're given two to 10 seconds before they make powerful assumptions about our ability to do our job," Haney says, adding that "60 per cent of employers will determine whether or not someone lands a job based on appearance alone." Which is probably all the convincing most of us need of the importance of dressing the part, though that part can of course vary

depending on the field and position you're in. "I advise anyone working in a corporate environment to study their industry dress code, since what is business dress to a law firm differs greatly from what is business dress in a creative industry such as advertising or PR," Saab explains.

Saab highlights the fact that while our highly image focused society has made many of us keenly aware of the importance of the exterior, that is far from always the case. "Living in the 21st century, people are much more exposed to visual images and messages from the media, every single day. The majority have learned how to filter these messages into categories of dos and don'ts, rights and wrongs. However, you still find many people who do not fully realise the impact of their visual image and its effect on their advancement in life," she says. One of the principal areas where our appearance does impact on our life is work. In few circumstances are we likely to come across competition as openly and as regularly as in the job market, especially in difficult financial times like these. A fact that makes image a potentially powerful tool, provided we know how to use it.

"We live in a very competitive and visual world where many people have gained higher skills; what will set you apart from the crowd is the positive impression you make with your image, as well as your experience," Saab says. Similarly, Haney emphasises that image alone is not enough, that a winning combination is one of great image and great skill. "It's certainly not all smoke and mirrors, we also have to have the skills to back up what we do," she says. "It's just that, initially, we're creating the interest necessary to be given the opportunity to show people what it is we can do."

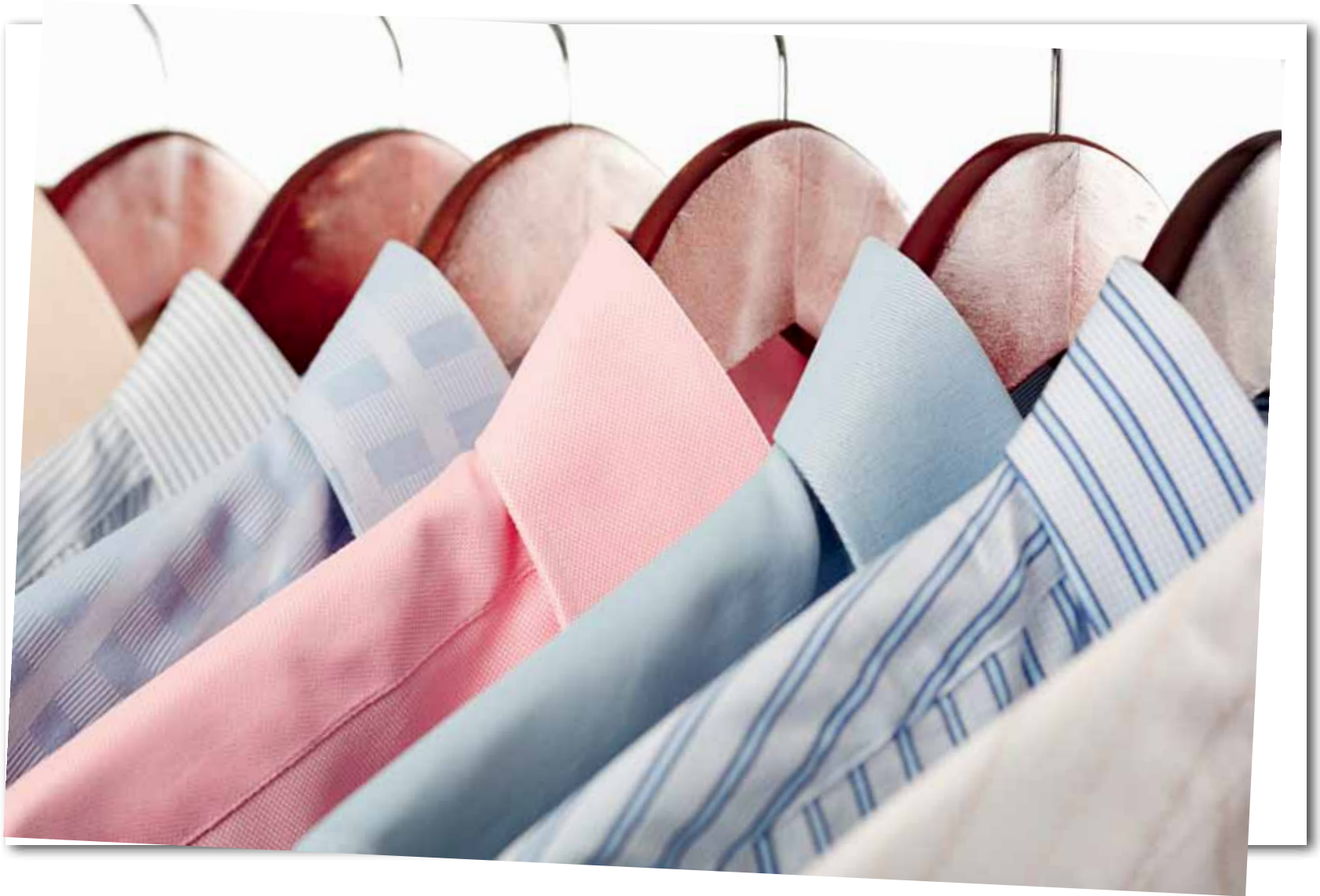
Appearance, Haney goes on to say, is not only of importance to the hopeful employee going for a job interview or the existing employee hoping to move up in the company, but also to employers. "Employees are companies most powerful and visible marketing tool. Companies spend a lot of time figuring out what their vision is and what they want to be known for



and their employees are the most visible tool to market that," she says. "So it's important that each employee takes responsibility for making sure that they are representing the brand and vision of the company they work for. And in this superficial world that we live in, the way that we are going to represent that in the easiest, quickest and most powerful way is through our appearance."

The power of appearance lies not only in the look itself but in the effect it has on the way we feel and act. "When people know they're dressed appropriately in a given situation, their confidence goes through the roof, they worry less about themselves and become more focused on their job, which makes them better at what they do," Haney says. Looking good it seems, is not only great for us, it's great for business. Agreeing with >

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this statement, Saab adds that what you wear needs to be appropriate for the situation, and also appropriate for you. "Your image affects not only how others perceive you but how you feel about yourself. When you're dressed in a fit and colour that flatters you and a style that is in line with your personality, you will automatically feel great, as you know that you look great."

Haney similarly points out that while there are certain rules when it comes to what we should and should not wear at work, it is key that what you put on is something you feel comfortable in. "We all have a fashion personality and what you wear has to fit with who you fundamentally are, you have to feel comfortable in it," she says. Or, as Saab puts it, "Self-image is what you think of yourself and if you're not comfortable with your looks, the effect will run through all different aspects of your life, from

**"DETAILS ARE WHAT HOLD EVERYTHING TOGETHER AND A GOOD IMAGE IS VERY DETAIL FOCUSED."**

personal to corporate." Both Haney and Saab stress that this means being realistic about what it is that suits you.

"Women have a tendency to want to be a certain size, to be very set on being a size 6 or a size 8," Haney says, adding that this is something we need to move away from. "I was a fashion buyer for many years and I can tell you that women are going to wear all different sizes depending on season, material and clothing line." This is something Saab agrees with, commenting that "fit is always key so

don't stick to a certain size, as size differs among designers; choose the fit that most flatters you."

While both personal style and the industry you're in should be taken into account when it comes to determining how to dress and how to present yourself, stylists agree that there are certain universal dos and don'ts. "Wear stylish clothes with a conservative twist," says Ivana Mazic. "Have a spotless, polished and conservative look and don't overdo it; a classy look is the goal." Haney, meanwhile, advises against a style that is too laidback and relaxed.

"People like their business casual but in my opinion, business casual has become business comfortable and it's often sloppy," she says. The image consultant, who predominately works in the corporate environment, adds that one of her favourite sayings is that "if you can play a sport in it, go to the gym in it or coach your >

Appearance is critical to both men and women in the workplace. Crisp, clean ironed shirts are a must, whilst attention to detail with elements such as appropriate ties and polished shoes also make a positive impression.





First impressions count, so be sure yours is a positive one. Dress conservatively and with an eye on style.



immaculate you are or aren't, while the way you style it tells people about your personality."

Not all women choose to wear makeup but Haney and Saab agree that in a corporate environment, doing so is a definite advantage. "Research shows that women who wear makeup to work are seen as more credible and have a higher earning potential," Hadley reveals. It is however important to get it right. "Natural makeup is a must for women, to give that polished, professional look, but be careful not to over do it," Saab says. While appearance alone is not enough to land or hold a job, and hopefully never will be, your style and image can certainly make a positive difference to your life and your career. Time for a wardrobe revamp perhaps? ■

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son's soccer team in it, you shouldn't be wearing it to work." And, in work as well as out of it, it may be the accessories that make or break your outfit, with Haney commenting that "shoes are very important. They are the easiest way for both men and women to elevate their level of dress and it can make a huge difference."

As important as it is to give thought to your outfit, ensuring it is both work appropriate and suited to your personality, doing only that is not quite enough. As is so often the case, the seemingly small things can make all the difference. "The devil is in the details," Haney says. "Details are what hold everything together and a good image is very detail focused. I have a phrase, which I heard on a television show that I like to use, that the big picture is made up of little details. This is a point of view that Saab backs up, stating that "paying attention to the small details is just as important as the basic outfit. Look out for any loose seams, threads or buttons on your shirt or trousers."

These aspects are not only important because any company is likely to prefer a polished look to a scruffy one but also because of the conclusions people draw from it, about your ability to do your job or advance to a more senior position.

"Your clothing tells people about you. They give a hint of who you are and where you are going," Saab says. "If you turn up to work dressed less than up to standards, your colleagues and clients will assume that you don't care enough about it and possibly are not worthy of your position." Your appearance can also send inadvertent signals about your ability to multitask, stay focused under pressure and manage your time, qualities all employers look for. "Not paying attention to details in your wardrobe and grooming reflects a lot on your time management skills and [people] subconsciously assume that they can't trust you with their accounts, for example, if you don't have time to shave, style your hair or apply makeup in the morning," she says.

Stylists are in agreement that

personal grooming, including makeup, nails, hair and shaving, also play a pivotal part in your overall image. Chipped nail polish is for instance a big no-no. "Image is all about the messages we send out to other people and it's all about being credible," Haney says. "If you can't be bothered to take your chipped nail polish off, that goes to credibility." Hair is also key, with Haney commenting that "hair is our most powerful accessory" and Saab stating that "clean hair is a must, styling is a plus" and that "the way you care for your hair gives a hint of how

## The Image Lowdown

### A fail proof style guide from Dubai based stylist Ivana Mazic

- Have a spotless, polished and conservative look
- Always have your hair groomed
- Don't overdo it – a classy look is the goal
- Good shoes are very important
- Wear stylish clothes with a conservative twist
- Black and white is always a hit
- Don't overdo it with jewellery
- Clothing that reveals too much is not appropriate for business