

Dressed for success

No matter what they say, first appearances count.

Eileen S. checks out some image consultants.

THE TERM "IMAGE CONSULTANT" sounds like a bad hangover from the 80s. Once the domain of rich women going through menopause, it has now become a common, sometimes elitist, service. Occasionally, in Malaysia, the industry reaches new heights of ridiculousness when hairdressers, beauticians (or is it aestheticians these days?) and make-up artists claim they can deliver a brand new you in a four-hour consultation.

Trawling through the many callcards, it seemed impossible to find someone qualified, trained and professional in their approach. Most were in the beauty profession like hairdressing and cosmetics. One particular "image consultant" designed and tailored uniforms, bridal gowns and did hair and make-up consultations.

This lack of professional guidelines has translated into widespread confusion about what image consultants do.

In essence, a consultant should be able to help a client with their overall image. This covers more than make-up, beauty and skin-care. Being able to present yourself well in the business environment, both visually and vocally should be a priority.

As such, image consultancy is not simply for women, but also men. Anyone who has doubts about their capabilities should be able to find a consultant who can tailor their knowledge to the client's needs. The hall-mark of a successful consultant should be increased confidence in the client.

In Malaysia, consultants seem to

be loosely organised into two camps. One specialises in personal appearance, while the other deals specifically with presenting a professional image.

Image Power specialises in the latter. Dolly Kee, the principal consultant, doesn't do what many people expect her to, that is make-up and beauty consultations. An honours degree major in Business Administration, she was the Marketing Manager of Thomas Cook Travellers Cheques for Malaysia and Brunei prior to setting up on her own. Her list of clients include Motorola Malaysia, the Regent Hotel, Citibank Bhd and Telekom Malaysia.

She handles in-company programmes as well as public programmes. She believes that there is a lack of awareness on the fundamentals

of professional behaviour. As such, her accent in her sessions are on professionalism as to the key of success. She does more than talk on the frills and fancies of etiquette. She blends her sessions with contemporary management and self-awareness theory.

She sees projecting a professional image at work as vital to success: "There are three perceptions of image. The first is self-perception. How do we see ourselves. Then, there's the way that we're seen by others. How do they view us and how do they rate us. Finally, there is the ideal - how we wish to see ourselves and to be seen as by others."

A good way to assess how you're doing is to ask yourself: "Do I dress for my current position or do I dress for the position I want?" Your answer should reflect what you look like to your peers and boss now. Your professional image should also co-relate with your organisation's industry.

Generally, when a company approaches Kee for sessions, she assesses what the company would like her to do. Then, she fine-tunes her modules to address the company's specific needs. Her modules (like a menu, in a sense) allow companies to pick and choose. But she does have her own recommendations, if asked about the very basics of professionalism: professional image (building your professional image from the outside), developing your professional self-image (building your professional image from the inside out) and creating the "rapport" magic.

There are other areas, such as business etiquette and protocol and enhancing telephone image, which she offers. She does advise however, that the duration of each module be at least half a day. Communication is not a barrier as she does her sessions in Bahasa Malaysia if requested.

A professional to her finger-tips, she solicits feedback from her clients via assessment forms and questionnaires. Her track record based on feedback from past participants is certainly most impressive as her programmes are rated above average to excellent for every session that has been conducted to date.

Image is a powerful thing. Occasionally, it can make you or break you. If in doubt, consult people who can help you. But it'll save you a lot of money if they're professionals. Do take the time to ask for qualifications and references. **E**

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