



YOUR **IMAGE** MATTERS

An Image firm that suits you madam

RACHEL HAMADA

IMAGE consultants may be invisible to most of us most of the time, but their work is everywhere.

Tony Blair and innumerable MPs and business leaders go to style consultants to seek guidance on how to project a confident, charismatic image to the public or to clients.

This is the market that Edinburgh-based Maria Hamilton has her eye on. She launched her i4life company last year. Now she is starting to build her client base with individuals and small groups.

She has invested substantially in the business and expects to start making a profit by the end of the year, allowing her to expand.

Long term, she wants to go into the business place and advise businesses on image as part of wider change management processes.

Ms Hamilton says that as director of an IT business consultancy in the past much of the work her company did was in the "change management" area, and that her experience showed her "you can't just change processes, you have to change the people as well".

She says: "You can do image consultancy on two levels. There's the personal side, which is what I am concentrating on at the moment, but there's [also] the corporate side, which I'd like to get into later on.

"This looks at corporate values, corporate messages and translating them down to individual staff in terms of how they present themselves."

She says that the process of image consulting is designed to help the way in which an individual comes across to others - this could be a chief executive trying to seal a crucial deal or an employee going for an important job interview.

Image is the single most important factor in winning a job, she argues. Ms Hamilton quotes research by sociolinguist and UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) psychology professor Albert Mehrabian, who says that the impact a person has on others depends 55 per cent on looks and body language, 38 per cent on the sound of the voice and only seven per cent on what is actually being said.

She says that image consultancy is an expanding profession and that her move from the corporate sector into the image business is not uncommon.

"There are so many people who are coming out of corporate into image consultancy. I met a lady who was a commercial director for the Hilton Group before, who now runs a sales and marketing consultancy and she's adding this to her business."

When Ms Hamilton decided to move into image consultancy, she trained for The Federation of Image Consultants (TFIC) qualification. She says that there are only nine TFIC-trained image consultants in Scotland, and just two in Edinburgh. Her recently launched Wear It Well initiative is an at-home workshop designed for groups of five or six women, although Ms Hamilton says she would also happily run a workshop for men.



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Her plan is to build up the credibility of the company through the workshops and consequent word of mouth.

She says: "Gaining credibility in this market is key - from that I'd like to develop it into the workplace and look for other people to collaborate with, but you need to get your base first of all."

She says that the reason she runs her workshops in clients' houses rather than hosting a big event is because of feedback she receives.

Customers say that they want a personalised and less intimidating forum rather than an impersonal large venue with lots of people.

Ms Hamilton adds: "I had my own colours and style done some years back and felt that it benefited me. It's not just a beauty thing, it's also psychological."

Ms Hamilton's consultations include skincare and grooming advice, colour consultation, cosmetic makeovers, style consultation, wardrobe planning advice and the option of personal shopping to help clients to buy the right items to start off their new wardrobe.

The Wear It Well workshop concentrates particularly on clothes. According to a recent survey by Churchill Home Insurance, women spend almost £100,000 in their lifetime on clothes and fashion accessories, of which half never see the light of day.

On average, Ms Hamilton says, women wear 20 per cent of their clothes 80 per cent of the time - leaving four out of five pieces of clothing languishing pointlessly in the wardrobe.

Ms Hamilton says that as clients gain a clearer idea of what they have in their wardrobes and its potential to do more, they can be more discerning about their purchases. This can allow them to invest in better quality items that clients previously thought they could not afford.

"With the style side, it's looking at your body shape and your face shape and looking at the geometry of these, and it's understanding the style and cuts of clothes that suit these," says Ms Hamilton. "What we often do is we put a round tablecloth on a square table - it doesn't look right, and we do it with our bodies as well."

At the workshop, she shows clients a rack of clothes in order to illustrate how many combinations can be created from a good capsule wardrobe that features good staples and co-ordinating colours.

The exercise is to help people think about how to form an effective wardrobe, and also to inspire them to unclutter their existing wardrobe.

She recommends spending money on important foundation garments like jackets and trousers, but says these can be matched with cheaper pieces that can be worn just for one season, and fashionable accessories.

"You can wear a cheaper top with a more expensive skirt or trousers and it brings it up, especially with good accessories. You have to be a bit canny and think before you buy."



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She says that many of us don't look at budgets when we buy clothes even though we budget for household bills and for holidays.

Ms Hamilton blames the "feel-good" factor for impulse buying, but says that this is short-lived, when we realise we have spent money on a piece of clothing that doesn't suit us and clashes with our other clothes. Once she has given clients an idea of what colours and styles suit them, she also offers advice on which shops they are best to go to in order to find the right kind of clothes.

If needed, she will come with a client to help them with their initial attempts to locate and identify these clothes.

As well as the Wear It Well workshop sessions, she has done business consultations, so far mainly for men.

One senior business manager says: "Like a lot of men I was scared of wearing colour. Ms Hamilton has given my wardrobe a sense of purpose, a coherence that was not there before."

In these consultations, business etiquette is important, Ms Hamilton says.

"You have to look at suits and shirts and what's appropriate. If you're a salesman you can be more casual and tailor down, whereas if you're a lawyer you need to be more authoritative and sober."

As William Shakespeare once said: "Apparel oft proclaims the man."