

*"One organization with a long record of success in helping people find jobs is The Five O'Clock Club."*

FORTUNE

## Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

Celebrating 25 years—  
America's Premier  
Career Coaching and  
Outplacement Network for  
Professionals, Managers  
and Executives

### The Importance of Image

By Cynthia Strite, Five O'Clock Club Coach

with David Madison



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Senior Five O'Clock Club  
Career Coach

**"When you are dressed in any particular way at all, you are revealed rather than hidden."**

Anne Hollander,  
*Seeing Through Clothes*

Is there really anything more that can be said about the importance of *image*? Since the publication of John Molloy's book *Dress for Success* in 1961, we all get the concept—don't we? Certainly that three-word title has become part of our business lexicon, and has even become a cliché. Who doesn't know, for example, to dress up for an interview?

But we have decided to say something about image for three compelling reasons:

1. Believe it or not, some people didn't get the message—at least it didn't sink in as well as it should have. We *do* have to keep talking about it.
2. Some people resent and resist the message; they actually put up a fight at the thought of conforming to a certain image, since image is a 'superficial' concern. However noble such a sentiment may be, these folks have failed to come to terms with the real world—the real *business* world, and the importance of image. The truth is that image counts—in all areas of life. Why wouldn't it count at work? In other words, to put it bluntly, they're wrong.
3. And finally, there's far more to *dressing for success* than hav-

ing the right clothes. We also need to talk about the behavior and demeanor required to match the outfit, i.e., it's vital to *dress up* the way you present yourself in *all* aspects. Whether you are a man or a woman, the total package you present to the world matters.

### Image counts—in all areas of life. Why wouldn't it count at work?

Let's take a brief look at these three realities—and then move on to talk about guidelines and suggestions.

#### 1. Missing the Message: What Can I Get Away With?

When we coach people at the Five O'Clock Club to get ready for interviews, we say, "It's show time!" That is, when you walk in for the interview, you will actually be on stage—so you want everything to be just right. But guess what: every day that you go to work, every time you attend a meeting—even outside of work—where you'll be mixing with colleagues in your industry, it's show time.

And from my experience, plenty of people have missed the message that success hinges on dress

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# Protecting Your Career

## UNDERSTAND YOUR ENVIRONMENT; UNDERSTAND YOURSELF

If you want to keep your job, it's no longer good enough to simply do your job and do it well. Your organization is changing, your industry is changing and your profession is changing. Are you out of the loop in your company? Many people join professional associations. But don't focus only on your profession! Instead pay attention to the industry and your employer.

Keep up with major trends affecting your industry by reading industry trade journals and joining industry associations. How do those trends affect your department or your specific job? *Right now, make a list of the major trends affecting your industry and how they might affect you or your department.*

Keep up with the major trends affecting your employer. You will be better informed and work better toward organizational goals! Read all press releases, study their website and annual report, and note any mentions in the press. Study what your executives say to the press. Search *Google News* for your organization and see what you find.

Here's an even better way to get tuned in, and this is your next assignment: *Have lunch once a month with someone in a different functional area or different division.* If you are in marketing, get together with someone in finance — for the sole purpose of better understanding trends in your organization. If everyone in your company did that, communication would be improved across the organization and it would be better for you as well as for your employer.

Organizational problems are *your* problems. If your employer is concerned about turnover, for example, or reducing costs, that is

also your concern. What can you do about it?

While you keep up with trends in your profession, think about your *employer* as you do it. Bring back information on trends that may impact your organization. Notice if your department or division is being bypassed on developments that are critical. For example, consulting firms specializing in the outsourcing of HR are selling to the CFO and CEO — HR is not even involved in the decision!

Your field is changing. Accounting changed with Sarbanes Oxley; IT (Information Technology) used to be back office — now it's a major function in many industries; HR jobs are now more metrics and strategy-oriented, not transactional. Whatever your field, it is changing.

If you are a department or a division head and people are not calling you about strategy issues, you are not a player.

### Understand Yourself

Our book, *Navigating Your Career: Develop Your Plan, Manage Your Boss, Get Another Job Inside* (paperback, 258 pages) can help you inside your present organization. First, do the Seven Stories Exercise to help you understand what you enjoy doing and also do well. This will tell you the elements you need in a job to be satisfied and successful.

Then, do the Fifteen- and Forty-Year Vision: You must know where you want to go, and then you will more naturally accept assignments that fit in with your vision.

Get more sophisticated in managing your internal public relations by using the Eight-Word Message. Those *above* you in the

organization will then know how good you are.

Use our "Quarterly Review" to help you better manage your relationship with bosses, peers and subordinates and measure

your progress. The outgrowth of all of this is a Career Development Plan, which you will discuss with your boss, if appropriate.

By the way, The Five O'Clock Club delivers seminars on this subject at various organizations. Maybe we'll be coming soon to yours!

And remember: To advance your career, you must be proactive. ●

Kate Wendleton,  
President and Editor-in-Chief



### THE FIVE O'CLOCK NEWS

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and presentation, no matter where you are. This was demonstrated one evening at the Grand Central Branch of the Five O’Clock Club when three successful job hunters came back to report. While all of their stories provided insights on proper job search, their *appearances* illustrated how different people relate to the world—and how some people fail to get basic messages.

The first person was “buttoned up” in all respects; he wore a suit, crisp shirt and tie—everything was in place. He looked professional in all respects.

The second person’s presentation was borderline. She was definitely not dressed in a very professional manner; rather, she looked more like what she would wear on casual Friday.

The third person was a disaster. His hair looked like he had just crawled out of bed, he had not shaved, he had on a rumpled, un-ironed t-shirt, and his pants were baggy and unkempt. While he apologized for his appearance, he had known he was going to be in front of an audience that night—it was *literally* show time—so I was mystified why he had not bothered to look better. Furthermore, he was reporting on landing a consulting position—so he planned to continue his job search. Anyone in the Five O’Clock Club audience that night could have been a potential source for referrals. I would imagine folks would be reluctant to refer him for informational meetings given how he looked. I know I would have hesitated. This job hunter hadn’t really internalized the message about dressing for success. I am hopeful that he knew enough to clean up for interviews, but he failed to understand that, in a sense, you’re *always* being interviewed—especially in a setting like the Five O’Clock Club where people are keen to offer help.

There aren’t too many places where you *can* let down your guard and the office is certainly not one of them. Should you dress *every* day the way you would for an interview? Not necessarily, but that doesn’t mean that dress codes do not apply. We all know those who follow the *letter* of the dress code, but

not the spirit. They follow the dress code, but still manage to look sloppy or frayed around the edges. They send the message, “I really don’t care,” but the truth of *dress for success* is that bosses and managers are always looking for the people who *do* care. Is there ever an excuse *not* to look your best within the guidelines of the dress code?

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**Every day that you go to work, every time you attend a meeting, it’s show time.**

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### 2. Rejecting the Message: Appreciate My Skills, Not My Appearance

In addition to those who do know the importance of image—but just try to get away with too much—there are those who simply resist the whole idea of paying attention to image. They resent that something as “shallow and superficial” as external appearance should count for so much. In fact, we hear moral indignation from these folks: “With all that’s wrong with this world, with all the misplaced emphasis on glamour and beauty, the workplace should be exempt from such standards.” We also hear: “Why should we care all that much about how people dress? Please reward me on my accomplishments, my GPA, my MBA, my IQ, my EQ — not on what I wear.”

There would be no problem with this idealistic approach if everyone agreed that image is *unimportant*—and if the universal human inclination to evaluate people on *how they look* could be erased. For better or worse, we *do* size people up based on what meets the eye. As a species we always have done this, and we always will. Taking pride in appearance was not invented for the office! It’s hard to argue that the workplace can be a free-for-all, and we can be sure that the emphasis on image is here to stay. In truth, dress is a gauge of self-esteem and respect for the surroundings. For example, in the overwhelming majority of circumstances, potential clients will feel *disrespected* if

a salesperson shows up looking sloppy or dressed inappropriately for the role.

The argument that image guidelines for work violate individuality doesn’t hold water either. Even in the most casual environments, certain standards always apply. And most of us, when we walk into our offices, *give up* certain freedoms as part of the deal—and may not even think very much about the fact that we do. The language, vocabulary, posture and pastimes that we freely indulge in at home are simply not allowed at the office—any more than we can bring our pet boa to work. And, generally speaking, if we’ve signed on for an eight-hour day, even our freedom to come and go without accountability is limited. We’re employees—we really can’t ‘do as we please’ on someone else’s time and turf. Hence expectations and standards concerning dress cannot usually be construed as violations of individuality. The reality remains: The tendency to judge people on how well they dress and act will continue to impact promotion decisions.

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**Dress is a gauge of self-esteem and respect for the surroundings.**

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### 3. The Full Scope of the Message: It’s About *More* Than Clothes

Look around you at work....consider your closest colleagues, your boss, your boss’s boss: How would you sum up each one of these individuals in just a few words? You can be sure that they all do the same with you. The way people describe you is based on your dress and speech, your demeanor, your way of relating to others, your moods, your sense of humor or lack of it. Dress is absolutely part of the equation, but be aware that your image, and your chances for success, are based on far more than the clothes you wear. It doesn’t do much good to dress well—but then have people grumble about you behind your back.

I have found it helpful in working with executives to speak about *personal branding*: the total package that you

present for others to see. This is not about becoming a *famous* brand name, e.g., Martha Stewart, Tiger Woods, Howard Stern (all of whom work hard to define their brands), but about establishing your over-all image in the context that most matters to you. What message does your personal brand send out to the world? When the people around you think of you, what *do* they think? Chances are, these are the people who can influence your career the most. It is largely up to you to determine how the world perceives you. *You* are responsible for your brand's total marketing package.

What is at stake, after all? When we coach those who are in search of new jobs or careers, we stress the importance of outclassing the competition. When you get the offer and start a new job, you've won the race—you've outclassed the competition. But once you're on the job, you're in *another* kind of race. The focus shifts to managing your career astutely and advancing according to plan, which also requires outclassing the competition. Image should remain a primary concern—every day on the job.

So just what are the components of image? What's the total package that we need to be aware of? In the seminars and workshops that I give on this topic, I explain to executives that they need to concentrate on the three "V's."

**The language, vocabulary, posture and pastimes that we freely indulge in at home are simply not allowed at the office.**

### The First Image Component: Visual Appearance

When people address the issue of image, the question that comes to mind immediately is *what do you look like?*—a major component of which is *what are you wearing?* Hence clothing is a primary factor. Of course the fundamental role of clothing—starting presumably

long ago with the fig leaf or the loin-cloth—has been to *hide* our bodies. But I began this chapter with the observation by Anne Hollander (in her book *Seeing Through Clothes*) because of the paradoxical nature of clothing: "When you are dressed in any particular way at all, you are revealed rather than hidden." One interpretation of Ms. Hollander's message is that *we have control over much of what is revealed*.

The bad news about image and appearance is that there are some things over which we have little or no control, e.g., height, bone structure, eye color, the color of our skin. However, the good news is that there is much that we can control: weight, hair color and style, grooming in general, and, of course, what we choose to put on our bodies. But the elements that are under our control go even beyond these: what about posture, attitude, demeanor, mood, eye contact? Without a word being spoken, we give impressions to others. How many times have you described someone as "having a great upbeat attitude" or, conversely, "she always look down and depressed."

Social psychologists who have studied the dynamics of first encounters have found that it takes just about thirty seconds for people to *form impressions based mainly on what they see*: these impressions run the spectrum from social and economic status to education, occupation, marital status, ancestry, trustworthiness, credibility and potential for success. Most of these impressions, of course, are based on how you look and how you act.

Job applicants *can* essentially destroy their chances of being hired by doing poorly on a first interview: they don't get called back. They can destroy their chances by showing up in wildly inappropriate dress—or lack of dress. For example, I found quick consensus among my colleagues after we had interviewed a candidate who appeared with a bare midriff—complete with navel jewelry. Did we really want to start from scratch educating her about how to dress for an interview with a Fortune 500 company

or what it means to work in a professional setting? No, we did not.

If the visual impression that you make is positive, people will assume that other things about you are positive as well. Psychologists call this the 'halo' effect. If the visual message is negative, however, people may promptly lose interest, and may not make the effort to discover the talents and virtues that lie beneath the not-so-impressive exterior.

**Once you're on the job, you're in another kind of race. The focus shifts to managing your career astutely.**

As far as the dress component of image is concerned, there are several initial suggestions:

- o **Be observant.** Make an effort to tune in and notice things you have previously overlooked. How do the people one or two levels above you dress? What is the standard of dress and grooming for those who have more power and responsibility than you do? You may see immediately that there is room for improvement in your personal style and presentation.
- o **Ask for advice and feedback.** Your spouse, partner or best friend may or may not be sources of constructive criticism, but it doesn't hurt to start with them. However, since the stakes are pretty high, why not pay for a session with an image coach? You'll get an objective evaluation of the *brand* you're projecting every day in your professional environment—and whether you're helping or hurting yourself. You may leave the session with a list of minor and major changes to make with respect to clothing, hair style and grooming.
- o **Upgrade your wardrobe.** This *absolutely does not mean* necessarily spending large sums on designer labels. Look for bargains and shop smartly. You can get great style without spending a fortune. Savvy shoppers no longer exclusively shop in upscale stores. "Mastige" (a new word blending "mass"

and “prestige”) has become the name of the game: searching out the best value and the best look, no matter where. Regular customers of upscale stores like Saks Fifth Avenue are now seen walking the isles of WalMart and Target. We have heard of bargain hunters finding great clothes as well in thrift shops and on eBay. If you hate to shop or do not feel confident in selecting new clothes, seek help. One Five O’Clock Clubber adopted a truly strategic approach to changing his image: he signed up for a weight loss plan and hired a personal shopper to help him select his new wardrobe.

o **Pay attention to the details.** Little things can ruin an otherwise great presentation. How long has it been since you’ve had your shoes shined? Are your nails clean and manicured? The little touches can make a big difference. A woman who interviewed with one of my colleagues was eliminated from the competition for several reasons, including the fact that her fingernails were dirty!

o **Remember that ‘casual Friday’ doesn’t mean sloppy Friday.** How many employers have come to regret dress-down days? —because too many people think that dress down means ‘anything-goes.’ Just remember that every day when you go to work, it’s show time. So be sure that your ‘casual’ always translates to looking your best.

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**If the visual impression that you make is positive, people will assume that other things about you are positive as well.**

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**The Second Image Component: Verbal Skills**

The main plot line of *My Fair Lady* is the long hard struggle of Professor Higgins to transform the cockney flower-seller Eliza Doolittle into a lady who can be presented in society. It turns out that dressing her up to *look like a*

*lady* isn’t even half the battle. Higgins’ primary challenge is to get Eliza to speak English properly—and the project took many months. Eliza was ready for the embassy ball when the words that came out of her mouth matched her elegant gown. The lesson here: it won’t do much good to show up at work every day looking like a million dollars, but not be able to speak and act like you belong in the board room.

There are many elements involved in achieving excellence in the way you express yourself: Tone of voice, enunciation, vocabulary and word choice, powers of description, animation. Absolutely fundamental, of course, is the mastery of grammar. When I call Jane Doe on the phone, I say to the person who answers, “I’d like to speak to Jane, please.” If the response is, “This is her,” I know that there are gaps in Jane’s mastery of English. Would I have confidence in hiring or promoting Jane to represent my company? The problem, of course, is that Jane doesn’t *know* that her English is flawed—and most people won’t say, “Gee, Jane, you’ve used the wrong pronoun there.” Such a mistake may seem very trivial, of no more importance than the small details of your presentation—such as clean and manicured nails. But decisions on promotions and choice assignments may very well be based on such details. If you suspect that your usage of the English language isn’t all that it should be, hire a tutor, take a course, or buy a copy of *English Grammar for Dummies* to give yourself a refresher course on proper grammar.

However, a grammar book might not address all potential verbal issues. While in the last decade the use of the word “like” as a filler word has become popular among younger generations, other words such as “you know” and “basically” also detract from a professional image. Your image will take a serious hit if you pepper your conversation with “like,” “you know,” and “basically.” I recently overheard a conversation that illustrates the point; this was a well-dressed junior executive speaking:

“Robert was like you know really upset when he found out that report wasn’t done on time. He was like shouting at all of us. I was like this is really not happening. He even like asked the manager to come to the staff meeting. It was like really embarrassing.” You might not even notice that you’re speaking this way—but others may, especially in professional environments. Recently a client, who is a vice-president in the advertising industry, told me—as we were discussing image and presentation—that a close colleague pointed out that she used “like” too much and it made her sound immature. These filler words will never serve you well, so you are smart to concentrate on eliminating them from your vocabulary.

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**Notice how the people one or two levels above you dress.**

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Regrettably, some accents can also detract from one’s presentation. Regional or foreign accents might be a problem for some roles and in some industries. If you suspect your accent may be holding you back, look into an accent reduction course. This is not a matter of giving in to regional or ethnic biases; it’s a matter of becoming the best possible communicator. In the 1988 film *Working Girl*, which is a modern variation on the *My Fair Lady* tale, Melanie Griffith’s image transformation—from secretary to corporate professional—included hiring a speech coach to rid herself of an accent that would not serve her well as she climbed the corporate ladder.

And what can be said about cell phone etiquette? This certainly falls into the category *how you speak*. You can speak very softly into a cell phone and the person on the other end *will* hear you. Most of us do business by cell phone—in the company of colleagues, and commonly in the company of many others as well. Chances are, some may question your judgment if you speak so loudly about company business

that half the people in the commuter train can hear you. Your image as a professional is diminished if you disregard proper cell phone etiquette.

**‘Casual Friday’ doesn’t mean sloppy Friday.**

**The Third Image Component: Visual Aids, the Documents that Support Your “Brand”**

We all know the horror of discovering an error on our résumé—after 25 copies have gone out. We know there’s little chance that any of those résumés will result in interviews—so we kick ourselves for being so careless. Yes, we made a mistake, but it’s important to realize that this is actually an image issue. *Every document that leaves your desk represents you and your brand.* People draw conclusions about you—and the quality of your work—from the documents that you produce. It’s up to you to set the standards and tone for the materials that leave your office. They speak volumes about how you do business.

We have all seen PowerPoint presentations that are an embarrassment because of misspellings and egregious grammatical errors; or so much information is crammed onto each slide that the message is dense and unintelligible. The presenter is demonstrating carelessness or incompetence to 50 or 100 people at once! How could this not be an image issue? So give your presentations a test run with trusted colleagues; ask for suggestions and corrections. Be vigilant in proofing all written presentations for which you are ultimately accountable.

Email is another source of potential misrepresentation of your brand. We love email and cannot live without it, but because of the speed of this modern medium, it is so easy to make presentation mistakes. By quickly hitting the send button, too often emails inadvertently are sent to the wrong people, sometimes with disastrous or embarrassing results. Or they convey the wrong

tone. Taking time to read messages several times—and reflect on how they’ll be perceived—is vital. Because they are too hastily done, email messages are often misconstrued and perceived to be negative, when, in fact, that was not the intention of the sender. It’s a good idea to be *overly* cautious to insure that you are conveying the proper tone; this is a key to effective email communication.

While we tend to be somewhat more forgiving of typographical, spelling and grammatical errors in emails—given the speed with which they are written and sent—if you want to continue to set yourself apart from the competition and present your best possible image to the world, take time to make sure your emails are error-free.

Producing great documents rests ultimately, of course, on your skills as a writer; many careers have stalled because of the failure to write well. It takes a lot of reading, hard work and focus to learn how to write well for business. If you need help, get it. There are lots of resources to draw upon: Hire a tutor, take courses or read books. A place to start is *The Idiots Guide to Writing Well.*

**Your image as a professional is diminished if you disregard proper cell phone etiquette.**

**A Final Thought on Image**

So, these are the three “V’s”. There’s a lot to pay attention to. You may have your work cut out for you in terms of polishing your image. Of course, it can be argued that there are much more important things to worry about in this world than good grammar, shined shoes and manicured nails. But one could just as easily argue that it’s a waste of time to keep the house clean or paint the shutters every few years. The truth is we all devote a lot of time and energy to our own personal needs and making things better in our daily lives.

And most of us have a vision of how we’d like to have our lives play out. At the Five O’Clock Club we urge peo-

ple to have a Fifteen or Forty-Year Vision, depending on your age and where you are in your career. If a significant part of your vision involves career, then a certain amount of planning is usually required. Having things go your way usually depends on making the right choices at crucial times—and by *looking and acting the part.* You may still find yourself arguing that image is a superficial concern. But whether we like it or not, how we look and act is part of how we are judged by others. They *are* watching, and in business it is part of the game. It is your choice to play the game or not, to be concerned about your *brand* or not. It’s always show time. Shakespeare’s words apply to the business game: “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their entrances and exits and each in his time plays many parts...” Will you be ready when the curtain goes up? You never know when you will be influencing the influencers.

Achieving your Forty-Year Vision may not depend on being the most beautiful, but I guarantee this: how you choose to look and present to the world will definitely have an impact on being selected for the roles you choose as you go forward. ●

*In addition to being a Five O’Clock Club coach for more than six years and a former branch head, Cynthia Strite has over 20 years of management experience in human resources, education and coaching in the public and private sectors.*

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