Dress for success

With IT departments coming into increasing contact with clients, first impressions are important. How you look can help seal the deal or win that promotion. By Kim Gilmour

You breezily waltz into the board-room, oblivious to the stares. Everyone is wearing crisp suits and ties while you're sporting a bright yellow, wrinkled Hawaiian shirt. You don't think it matters. As an IT manager, you are valued by your colleagues and consider yourself to be doing a commendable job.

For some IT people, what they choose to wear in the morning may be seen as irrelevant compared to the pressing projects at hand. But with IT directors increasingly having to meet with clients, report to the boardroom and generally uphold their department's – and their organisation's – image, it's possible that first impressions will have a lasting impact.

A positive image is a high priority for many organisations. Sometimes there's no escape for those who represent their companies in IT, even if they seem to be tucked away in the back office, cut off from the outside world.

"Image is everything," claims Australian image consultant, Evelyn Lundstrom. "Everyone should see themselves as the CEO of their own marketing company."

Lundstrom founded an image consultancy business, First Impressions, in 1990 and developed the curriculum for consultant training in Australia.

Lundstrom says, when it comes to finding what to wear, there are several things people need to look at: "Whatever you choose must suit the situation you're in," she says. "Then there's the physical side of image. Get the grooming right. Colour comes into that as well. Some people look better in some colours than others.

"The next thing to look at is personality. You won't get a sporty person into a restricting suit. They want movement they can relish. Some people are dramatic and love to be seen. They need to wear sharp colours and con-trasts. Other people might go for classic styles that fit into their environment. These people are reliable, trustworthy and do the legwork."

> **" The perception is that if their clothing looks out of date, their ideas are also out of date "**

Suit the situation

Lego's IT manager, Earl Lappen, says IT directors should "dress right for the environment".

For example, those in the back office who don't usually work with people outside their organisation should dress according to their function. "This might mean being comfort-able, but it doesn't give you the excuse to be unkempt. If you dress for success, it offers a very positive indication of oneself," he says.

Head of IT recruitment at Morgan and Banks, Ian James, has also noticed dif-ferences in how IT directors may dress. "Some IT man-agers in services dress differ-

Looking the part

1. Don't just dress up, dress appropriately for the situation.
2. Look at your grooming as well as your dress sense.
3. Different colours make a different impact; assess what impression you want to make and keep this in mind when deciding what colours to wear.

Illustration: Gregory Baldwin

ently from those in manufacturing organisations," he says. "You need to be a little more practical if you're working on a shop floor. In a workshop environment, you'd stand out if you wore a blue pinstripe."

Lundstrom says keeping up with dress trends is important for those in the ever-changing IT industry. "The perception is that if their clothing looks out of date, people might assume their ideas are also out of date," she suggests.

Lappen agrees, saying, "I think if your profession is a modern one, then it wouldn't be consistent to present yourself as old-fashioned."

But James thinks that ultimately, those who talk to IT managers are looking for business benefits and that it's "a bit of a worry" if people are going to judge you on appearances.

That's a notion shared by FLORAFoods' IT manager, Annette

Wilson, who's been in the IT business for 25 years. She dismisses Lundstrom's comment as a "load of rubbish", saying that because most IT departments are isolated from the outside world, what people wear is irrelevant.

LUNDSTROM: ❝ Your image is your most important visual professional overhead ❞

Dealing with colleagues

"It's not how you dress, it's more how you deal with people and your professionalism," Wilson says. "It's more internal, so it doesn't matter very much – I hardly deal with anyone outside the company at all."

But Lappen thinks that how people

dress and present themselves is a large part of conveying your professionalism.

James finds most IT managers he comes into contact with are well aware of their image within their organisation and know how to dress appropriately. "They are dealing with the boardroom and other senior executives. They have got to project the 'corporateness' of the individual," he says. "There's nothing worse than someone coming into an executive meeting in a checked suit and brown pants while all the others are wearing big blue suits."

But Wilson thinks even dressing up for the board is unnecessary. "I don't think boardroom members in most organisations are so 'ivory towerish' that you have to dress up. They're beyond that sort of thing."

She does acknowledge that IT people would probably dress up when visiting other companies, but within

Colour coded image

The colours you wear are an important part of the impression you make

Image consultancy is booming in the US. Marily Mondejar is a US-based executive director of the Institute for Image Management, an image management consulting and training firm which takes a so-called "systems thinking" approach to image analysis.

For example, if someone loses weight, they feel good and pamper themselves. This in turn triggers off positive, confident personality traits which align and connect with one's "life purpose" or values.

Mondejar's clients have included Chubb Insurance, Walt Disney World and Apple Computer. She says image consciousness and style have been crucial factors in modern society ever since the televised Kennedy-Nixon debates in 1960, where a more professional, presidential image saved the day for Kennedy during the election campaign.

A prolific public speaker who has been

MONDEJAR: ❝ Colour can be the heart of your image strategy ❞

widely quoted in the US media, Mondejar claims one major aspect of image analysis is colour analysis. "Colour can be the heart of your image strategy," she says. "Colour communicates subconscious messages of health, power, culture and socio-economic

position. Red for the passion, white for the sacred, green for abundance."

Dark clothes suggest authority, she says, while light colours suggest friendliness. Mondejar suggests wearing dark suits and a light coloured shirt for a "professional but approachable" image. For any situation, the effect that you want

to make should be identified before dressing accordingly:

Red: Can make time seem to slow down.
Orange: A "declassifying" colour, moves economic position downward and extends appeal to a broader range of people.
Yellow: Conveys "temporariness", or something that is new. Babies cry more in a yellow room.
Blue: Responsibility, knowledge, trustworthiness, caring and mercy.
Green: Prestige, upper socio-economic state. A good colour around food.
Brown: Not a colour with authority in a business environment. Can make you claustrophobic.
Grey: Sophisticated, excellent for business suits.
Black: Dignity, sophistication, refinement, authority. Great colour for women's business suits, but should be worn by men in tuxedos only.
White: Delicacy, refinement, cleanliness and precision.

Source: Marily Mondejar, The Institute for Image Management