

# HOW TO GET “THE LOOK”

YOUR IMAGE SPEAKS  
VOLUMES BEFORE YOU  
EVEN SAY A WORD.  
WHAT IS YOUR LOOK  
SAYING ABOUT YOU?

by Erin Casey



brid

“Pink is my signature color, Mother.” If you read those words with a Louisiana drawl, you know it’s a line from *Steel Magnolias*, and Shelby Eatenton (Julia Roberts) is defending her wedding color choices. It’s a line that has stuck in my head since I first saw the movie in 1989, not because I like pink especially, but because I love the idea of having a signature look.

Ideally, your choice of color or clothing shouldn’t have to be defended. It should speak before you say anything at all. It should tell the world of your confidence, your passion for life, your extreme

perception of you. Fifty-five percent of the first impression you make has to do with appearance.”

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Andy Sachs (Anne Hathaway) is actually hired *because* of her disheveled appearance. Miranda Priestly (Meryl Streep) immediately sizes up the young woman, and as she reviews Andy’s resume says, “And you have no sense of style.” The statement, so matter-of-factly delivered, summed up Miranda’s perception of her new hire—you look terrible so maybe you’ll focus on your work. Not an especially great first impression.

Like it or not, people form their opinions about our talents, our intelligence and countless other aspects of our personality based on the image we project.



capability. Unfortunately, I haven’t developed my look or signature style that fully. More often than not I stand in my closet and debate what to wear based on what’s clean and not too-badly wrinkled. But as a professional I realize this probably isn’t the best approach to presenting an image that tells the world, my boss or my clients anything meaningful about me.

## YOU ONLY GET ONE CHANCE

It would be great if people actually got to know one another before making any judgments about a person’s strengths or weaknesses, intelligence or even likeability. But the reality is, within mere seconds of meeting someone for the first time, we form opinions based largely on what we see.

Michelle Sterling, image consultant and principal of Global Image Group, says that’s why image matters. “Your look influences others’

“Your image is your calling card,” says Celebrity and Image Branding Specialist Amanda Sanders of New York Image Consultant. “We’re an image-driven society. Unfortunately you’re judged within the first couple of seconds of walking in the room. It’s better to have a package that sells you rather than you having to sell yourself.”

## CREATING A SIGNATURE STYLE

Image is about creating a look that positively influences others’ perceptions, is suitable for the situation and reflects your personality. If you’re wearing a designer suit, you may look fabulous but feel completely false. Or, you might be totally comfortable in jeans and a T-shirt, but be underdressed for a meeting where the expectation is business casual attire.

So how does one begin to develop such a style? At Global Image Group, clients begin by completing an image assessment form that

helps to determine preferences. The form helps individuals evaluate their wardrobe needs based on their lifestyle, personality, personal coloring and build. Sterling asks, "Are you sporty or traditional, or are you more dramatic in your style?"

Evaluating what you naturally gravitate toward when it comes to clothing designs is another way to begin to develop a personal style. Sanders recommends looking at magazines and tearing out looks you like. "See if there's a pattern you respond to," she says. "Is it corporate? Is it bohemian?" This simple activity can help you determine which colors, styles and designers best suit your style.

### GET A BETTER BODY—INSTANTLY

Creating a cohesive look begins by evaluating your lifestyle, your needs, personal preferences and, above all, your body type. "Understanding your body type is very important," Sanders says.



"Whether you're happy or unhappy with it, dress appropriately for your body."

Sanders has worked with a slew of celebrities. Her high-profile clients face the camera on a regular basis and in addition to looking fabulous she says many want to lose 5 to 10 pounds. "Most people who are unhappy about their flaws wear things that hide the body. I tell my clients that if you're wearing clothes that are really appropriate for you, you'll look 5 to 10 pounds thinner."

**"Your look influences others' perception of you. Fifty-five percent of the first impression you make has to do with appearance."**

*—Michelle Sterling, Global Image Group*

Clothes that stand out from the body don't hide weight; in fact the opposite is true. Wearing clothes that skim the body without being too tight is a better solution. Body type is especially important when it comes to fashion trends. When skinny jeans hit the runways, many un-skinny people panicked. But the truth (thankfully) is style is about much more than fashion. "If something isn't appropriate or flattering, it's not 'in,'" Sanders says. "And skinny jeans are not flattering to half the population!"

### HERE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW

So how do fashion trends fit into this process of creating a signature look? Trendy styles can be fun and tempting but they're not a must for a great wardrobe. "Adapting trends into your personal style

is your personal preference," Sterling says. And there are a few things to consider before you rush out and plunk down your credit card to buy the latest designer look.

Again, body shape is important. "Look at your body type in relation to the trend," Sterling says. If you want to incorporate trends into your wardrobe, do so only with pieces that look good on your body. A

**"I tell my clients that if you're wearing clothes that are really appropriate for you, you'll look 5 to 10 pounds thinner."**

*—Amanda Sanders,  
New York Image Consultant*



couple other assessments can help you decide if a particular fashion trend is right for you. "The first thing to ask is, 'Is it age appropriate for me?'" Sterling says. "Then ask, 'Is it conducive to my lifestyle?' and 'Where can I incorporate this into my wardrobe?'"

For example, Sterling points out metallics were a hot trend this past season that may or may not fit into a woman's everyday life. "If you're a mom or work in a corporate office, you're not necessarily



going to want to buy a metallic dress or top. But maybe it's cute in accessories like a pair of shoes, or a handbag or a chunky bracelet."

Money is another consideration. High-fashion pieces and runway looks may be interesting or fun, but they can also be outrageously expensive. "It's not conducive to put runway looks in your wardrobe unless you buy pieces that are less expensive," Sterling says. "They're not necessary to build a cohesive wardrobe." And, as for those trendy pieces you *do* choose to incorporate into your wardrobe, she says, "Understand that they could very well go out next season. When you have a 'costume' piece, they're noticeable the next year."

## SOPHISTICATED STYLE

Designing a look that's personal, that can work where you do—whether it's at home, at school, in the office or on the go—is dependent on understanding yourself: your personality, body type, preferences and lifestyle. It's also important to understand who your "target" is and what kind of image you want to project—especially in business.

Once you've determined your style, start building a wardrobe with a few basic pieces. Sterling says five core pieces are the foundation for a businesswoman's wardrobe: A black suit consisting of a jacket, skirt and pants, a black shift dress and black pumps. "You can add splashes of color with your handbag, fun shoes or a top that has interest in it," she says.

Money is almost always better spent on pieces that will stand the test of time. "It's better to invest in classic pieces and experiment inexpensively with trends," Sanders says. "A classic, sophisticated wardrobe that's seasonless and timeless is the best investment."

## THE FINISHING TOUCH

Accessories are the icing on the cake when it comes to creating a personal and versatile wardrobe. From shoes to a great bag to jewelry, accessories can help you make a powerful style statement. Pulling a look together by repeating colors in your outfit, in your clothing, jewelry, shoes and handbag helps to create a harmonious look. "Never leave home without a watch, earrings and your handbag," Sterling advises. She also notes that the size and shape of your purse should be relative to your body size. "If you're slightly more rounded in shape, a slouchy purse, like a hobo bag, would suit you better. If you're tall and lean, you'd want a more structured bag."

Not only can jewelry, purses and shoes add color and a personal touch to your wardrobe, they can take an outfit from day to night with only a few minor changes. "Accessories are really the finishing details on an outfit. If you have a black suit and wear it with strappy shoes, a low-cut blouse and evening jewelry, that can



## Accessories are the icing on the cake when it comes to creating a personal and versatile wardrobe.

be evening attire," Sanders says. "If you change it up by wearing the suit with a white blouse, red pumps and pearls, that could be business attire.

"Good bags and good shoes never go out of vogue," Sanders notes. "Good accessories can really take an outfit to another level." Another bonus... they always fit!

Image matters. Like it or not, people form their opinions about our talents, our intelligence and countless other aspects of our personality based on the image we project. Creating a cohesive and personal style can help you make a very positive first impression. And having a fabulous style is about more than looks or fashion. As Sanders points out, "When you feel like a million bucks, you exude confidence and it's contagious!" EW