

Executive Presence Part Two: Image Up

By
Mariette Edwards

In Part One of this two-part series, we talked about executive presence and how to own the room through cultivating conviction and confidence every time you speak. Interior changes affect exterior results. Developing executive presence starts from the inside out.

Now that you know where to start building that presence, let's look at what clothing, color and style have to do with it and how to make the right choices to support your goals.

Back in the day when I was still in Human Resources, I made an interesting discovery. No matter what the candidate said or did in the interview, it was the thing about the person that didn't work that always pointed to the truth. For example, a job seeker interviewing for a very conservative position with a very old line Southern brokerage firm here in Atlanta presented herself in a beautiful tailored suit with a nice resume and all the right talking points. The problem was, she was wearing crystal drop earrings that looked like chandeliers. She really wasn't the conservative person she wanted me to believe she was. Her earrings were incongruent, making the presentation of herself inauthentic and, by the way, she just couldn't sell me on her passion for the opportunity. In fact, she quickly revealed her real interests, which clearly lay elsewhere. That led me to one of my mantras when coaching clients on how to interview and that is, "Believe the aberration." No matter how hard people try to twist themselves into fitting into a particular job spec, the truth always pops out somewhere. For whatever reason, we just can't keep from expressing ourselves in some small way. When you are the leader, these subtle messages are particularly damaging. Executive presence demands congruency and authenticity.

"But what about the clothes?" I asked Peggy Parks, image consultant and president of The Parks Image Group, Inc. for her thoughts on creating executive presence with what you wear. She gave me three simple tips you can use right now.

"First," Peggy says, "Wearing a jacket images you up instantly. "Your jacket is your power piece," she says. "You will note that when you put on a jacket, you stand up a little straighter and you feel more managerial. When people see someone wearing a suit or a jacket they automatically assume that that person is an executive or has a powerful position in business or in life."

Even if you don't keep your jacket on all day while at your desk, always have it close by, Peggy suggests, either behind your door, in your cubicle or in your car. "You always want to be ready to make a great first impression." Peggy told me. "You never know who is going to call and ask you to lunch and you don't want to be caught underdressed."

Second, pay attention to details. The devil really is in the details, as my earlier story demonstrates. Make sure your shoes are polished; your hair is cut and clean; your undergarments do not show (they are called “undergarment” for a good reason!). Always look perfectly groomed and polished. No chipped nail polish; no body odors or too much perfume or cologne.

And third, be consistent in every facet of your life. “Your words must be consistent with your verbal and non-verbal communication,” Peggy says. “Your manners need to be consistent with your environment, your personal brand, your corporate brand and your values and vision in life. Consistency is having a standard under which you will not fall, just like the CEO of a company or an Olympic athlete sets standards for themselves. They challenge themselves to strive for perfection.”

If you’d like to learn more about the services Peggy Parks offers, visit her online at www.theparksimagegroup.com.

But what about choosing the right things to wear, you may be asking? If you need a little help choosing the right look to support your goals, seeking out an image consultant is one option. Other help is available, too, and may be closer than you think. Most major department stores have personal shoppers that are happy to work with you. If you are in Atlanta, the personal shopper at Macy’s at Lenox Mall is terrific at translating your vision into a wardrobe that packs a punch. Be prepared to tell her what you’re going for so she can have selections ready and waiting for you when you arrive. The personal shopper at Saks Fifth Avenue at Phipps Plaza also gets rave reviews. Those are just a couple of examples. Contact your favorite department store in your city to explore working with a personal shopper there. If you live in New York City or are planning a trip there, consider treating yourself to an hour or two with Gabrielle Carlson at her studio on East 10th Street in Manhattan. Gabrielle is a clothing designer who specializes in wonderful suits, dresses and separates that are both conservative and creative. Her designs drape beautifully, move as you do and travel very, very well. And, you will have a look that is surprisingly affordable and uniquely you. Contact Gabrielle at GabrielleCarlson@verizon.net.

For men, Brooks Brothers, Jos. A. Bank, Men’s Wearhouse and K&G, for example, along with all the major department stores carrying men’s clothing are pleased to help you make a sound wardrobe investment.

Before we close, I want to say a few words about color and style. Color is one of your strongest allies in creating an executive presence. Color messages are simple to use when you know how they work. For example, red is an action color. It is the color of confidence, courage and vitality. In fact, red is a good color to wear if you are tired as it tends to energize. Black, on the other hand, is the color of stability. Black and white when worn together is a powerful combination. Yellow is a high communication color. Adding just a bit of yellow encourages others to engage in conversation. Style is an important consideration, too. Long sleeves, for example, are more serious than short sleeves. Solids are more serious than prints. For more on color and style, email me at

Mariette@starmakercoaching.com and I'll send you a Star Maker tip sheet on color messages and style and a fun clothing message exercise you can try to see how your message is being received.

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