

Job Market

Image Help Isn't Only for the Famous

By JULIE BICK

THINKING of her looming interactions with reporters and tournament sponsors, Stephanie Hall, the newly promoted president of the tournament owners association of the Ladies Professional Golf Association, would get queasy.

"I considered myself a Bridget Jones type," Ms. Hall recalled, "saying whatever came into my head and faux-pas-ing left and right."

To reduce her anxiety and to "take a good look at myself inside and out," Ms. Hall found an image consultant, Jill Bremer. For four months this year, Ms. Hall flew to Chicago from Athens, Ga., every other week for an all-day private session with her.

Ms. Bremer tailored her lessons to meet Ms. Hall's objectives. She filmed Ms. Hall giving presentations and coached her on nonverbal communication, noting, for example, that fluttering hands can signal that the speaker is not confident of what she is saying. She advised Ms. Hall on what to do if she became frustrated in a board meeting. She also had her prepare for news media interviews by writing down, and answering aloud, all the tough questions she thought she might be asked.

"Each session focused on another aspect of my image, from my clothes to my speaking voice," Ms. Hall said. The two still keep in touch to discuss any stumbling blocks or questions Ms. Hall may encounter.

"I was never taught this kind of information in school — you have to seek out a professional to guide you," Ms. Hall said.

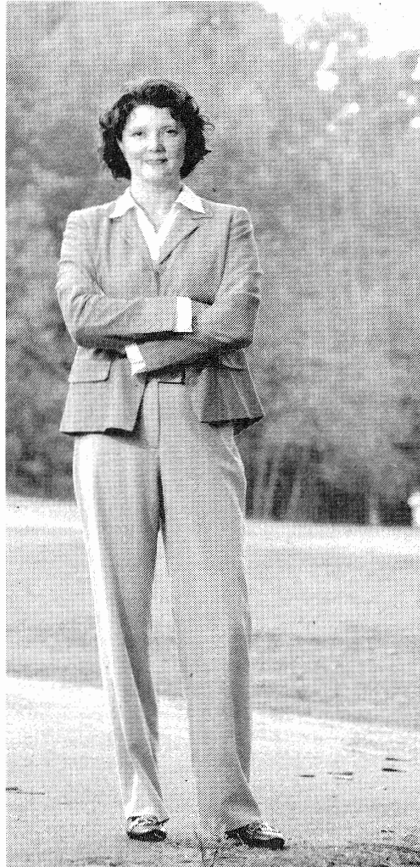
Image consultants can teach many skills that colleges or schools of business or law seldom touch upon. In connection with table manners, etiquette, appropriate dress or techniques in conversation, lessons abound. They include matters like meeting, greeting or introducing someone, making a positive first impression or discreetly picking up a dinner tab.

"Business success is about building relationships," said Marion Gellatly, president of the Association of Image Consultants International. "So learning to put someone at their ease, displaying appropriate manners and communicating clearly are critically important."

Television makeover shows seem to be behind a surge of interest in image consulting, said Ms. Gellatly, whose association has doubled its membership to 800 over the last few years.

"People are getting the message that it is O.K. to pay attention to the way you come across, and that it's not just for the rich and famous," she said. "Everyone wants to feel more confident in their social or business life — these shows just brought permission to the middle class to go for it."

Debra Lindquist, an image consultant in Denver for 30 years and a recent board member of the consultants group, said the demise of family dinners had left many new



Allen Sullivan for The New York Times

An image consultant helped Stephanie Hall become aware of nonverbal cues.

college graduates in dire need of table manners and conversational skills.

Ms. Bremer, who is an author of "It's Your Move: Dealing Yourself the Best Cards in Life and Work," said she focuses on the ABC's of appearance, behavior and communication.

"If I've done my job right," she said, "people won't notice my client's grammar, clothes or manners, but those things will all be working for them in the background to help project a confident and capable persona."

There seems to be evidence in the field of social psychology to support that claim. James B. Maas, a professor of psychology at Cornell University, said, "Research over the years tends to show that people who are well groomed, well mannered and well spoken are assumed to be more competent."

Image consultants usually charge their clients by the hour, and their rates vary widely. Charges can range from \$75 to more than \$300 an hour, and a rate of \$250 an hour is not uncommon for a highly regarded consultant in a major metropolitan area. Some have package rates for a series of lessons, or to evaluate a wardrobe or solve a com-

munication problem.

Employees of all types hire image consultants. Executives may want to improve their abilities to build consensus. Engineers may hope to polish their people skills. Candidates for jobs, whether internal or external, may seek tutelage to spruce up their work wardrobe or to practice being interviewed.

Inspiration can come from just about anywhere.

When Michael Jessup left the professional tennis circuit at age 27 to give private lessons in Cupertino, Calif., he noticed how smoothly his executive clients communicated what they wanted and how they wanted it done. He decided that if he wanted to be a successful coach, he needed to improve his own communication style, and he found Ms. Gellatly through the Web.

For the next six months, the two worked together for an hour every few weeks, with homework assignments in between, like introducing himself to new people or finding three topics in the newspaper to discuss for small talk.

Now, three years later, Mr. Jessup credits Ms. Gellatly with giving him more confidence in business and social situations, and he uses much of what she taught him.

His favorite lesson was the importance of questions when talking to a potential client.

"Rather than say, 'This is what I can do for you,' Marion taught me to ask things like, 'How often do you play tennis? What would you like to accomplish with these lessons? Do you have any injuries I should know about?'" Mr. Jessup said.

That approach helped him tailor lessons to his clients, which improved their experience with him and fostered more referrals, he said.

Those seeking an image consultant should know that the title does not require any certification or licensing. While a variety of training courses are offered, anyone can hang out a shingle and become an "image consultant."

Many specialize, most often in wardrobe and grooming, so potential clients should ask about the consultant's training and experience, and they should definitely check references, Ms. Lindquist said.

She advises clients to schedule a single two-hour session at the outset, to see if the consultant's approach and knowledge are compatible with their goals, before making a longer, more expensive commitment.

Ms. Lindquist warned against having unrealistic expectations. Soaking up all the consultant's advice, modifying your interpersonal interactions and changing the way the world perceives you can be time-consuming, she said, and expensive.

People also need to realize that managing their image is a lifelong process.

"As we get older, we update our goals, our ideas about ourselves — we keep evolving," Ms. Lindquist said. "The personal style change you work on today may not fit you forever."