



By Constance Dunn



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Conscious Style

Are you utilising this potent personal communication tool?

You and I are about to meet for the very first time. You walk into the room. I rise to greet you and shake your hand.

What do I see?

Hard to picture, isn't it? As humans, we are abundantly accustomed to extrospection—looking outside ourselves, at the world, and making swift deductions based upon what we see.

We are much less accustomed to including ourselves in that visual frame, chiefly because our eyes look outward—at others, not ourselves. We clock their speech, attire, gestures, and other cues, and hastily assemble a thumbnail sketch about them in our minds. Avoid 'Mmm, nice!' Caution: 'Wait, don't I know him?' And more.

We do this to others. Others do this to us.

Another kind of communication

Many fail to act on this keen fact. By crafting the most authentic and attractive version of ourselves, particularly in the professional realm, we can do much to direct

the look and shape of the sketch others make of us.

By doing this, we are effectively taking the reins in determining how others will perceive—and subsequently receive us. Choosing to self-direct others in this way is particularly useful when meeting new clients and employees, when impressions are assembled in seconds—and there's little time to correct, redact, or shore up initial misimpressions.

Let's focus on one of the most immediate, visible, and woefully under-utilised facets of your presentation: style. This includes everything from your shoes up to your shirt, and if you're the jewellery-wearing sort, well, that too. If you have it in your mind that clothes, shoes, and accessories are trifles, something for the vain or leisured sets to focus on while you attend to more pressing matters, you are leaving a powerful communication tool on the table.

You'll need a compass

To start: Rethink personal style as communication, another mode of expressing yourself to others in your professional realm. Whether you like it or not, your style speaks for you the moment you step into a room, and says much

about you before you even utter a syllable.

That said, the formulation of your personal style is worth at least the focus and effort you've put towards determining your firm's name or logo, designing your offices, or creating other professional communications—no?

For those in leadership positions, the crafting of personal style can be a tricky proposition: Veer too far in any one direction and you run the risk of looking not quite assured. The CEO, for instance, who insists on dressing like a swaggie because lurking somewhere in his or her mind is the idea that success and prosperity are bad. Or the CEO who goes heavy handed on the power look, and is all Rolexes and razor tailoring, with a too-deep tan and over-whitened teeth.

Your professional style brand

Here comes your professional style brand (PSB). This is a short phrase, all yours, that encapsulates your ideal, presentation wise—a conceptual vision that sums up what you wish others to see when they first set eyes on you.

This vision should be expressive of who you are and how you wish to

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appear to others. It is the best expression of you. It can be informed by people—Hugh Jackman's demeanor and George Clooney's tailoring—or a catchphrase that makes utter sense only to you—'cowgirl meets Martin Place'.

Take some time to craft your PSB and use it as mental shorthand to whip out each time you purchase clothes, shoes, or accessories. Use it to engage in a ruthless wardrobe cleaning to wipe away the dead weight—all of those items that are not serving you when it comes to showcasing your best professional self.

Square each new style acquisition—even if it's as small as a pocket square—against your PSB, and pretty soon your work wardrobe will consist of a targeted collection of accoutrements that speak clearly, cohesively, and beautifully for you.

Professional style considerations

- Evolve your look. What worked splendidly for you five years ago might not optimally serve you today. Rework your PSB from

time to time to keep your vision accurate and *au courant*.

- Style is not fashion. The two terms are often used interchangeable, yet are leagues apart. The first is forever while the second is fleeting, though really fun at times.

- Silent power. Impeccably made shoes and accessories, from watches and wallets to work bags and belts, have a way of quietly communicating success. Investing in them is a prudent idea, particularly since they tend to outlast lesser-quality items by decades. Hint: Expensive items are not always high-quality items, so learn which details separate the wheat from the chaff, workmanship-wise.

- Abide by modern marketing rule number one: the image must reflect reality. When there's a gap between what something *looks* like, and what it *is*, we get suspicious. Don't you? Your professional style should present your most attractive and *authentic* self. You'll be happier for it.

Besides—ever try to be someone else? It's exhausting!

- What is 'attractive style,' anyway? It means style that aesthetically satisfies *you*, and kicks off that mysterious chain of good feelings that moves from your mind to your movements and every other communication you send into the world. In short: Look good. Feel good. And perform even better.

- Make it fun. There are few things we control. Dressing ourselves is one. Get creative with this front-line communication tool of yours, and use it to cultivate an on-point professional style that expresses something unique about you. Bonus: When you do this, you help us better understand who you are. So thank you for that. •

About Constance Dunn
Constance Dunn is a Los Angeles-based style and communication expert, a marketing instructor at University of California Santa Barbara, and the author of self-improvement books *Practical Glamour* and the forthcoming *Best of Everything*. She has an MA in communication management from the University of Southern California, and opines regularly on culture, style, and communication in major media outlets including *South China Morning Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Los Angeles Times*. Connect with Constance on Twitter (@ConstanceDunn) or visit practicalglamour.org.