

# HOW TO PUT TOGETHER A COMPLETE PACKAGE

Many Institute members know they cannot rely purely on technical knowledge and business acumen to remain competitive. As soft skills are increasingly important, Jemelyn Yadao finds out how CPAs can maintain a polished professional image throughout their careers

Illustrations by Matt Burchell

**M**ore than five years ago, image consultant Caroline Sze noticed how professionals, including accountants, had begun to seek her unique services. Before that, some had considered her field unnecessary.

“Things changed,” says Sze, a Hong Kong Institute of CPAs member. “More people in the corporate world approached us for advice, including accounting professionals.” Sze herself worked as an auditor at PricewaterhouseCoopers before she founded Seasoning, a company that runs private and corporate grooming workshops.

Institute members would come to her with a common problem. “For example, their colleagues had been working in the

firm for so many years but the firm evolved and improved,” she recalls. “They would come to me because they wanted the staff or management team to do the same.”

Others, she says, would come to her looking for a change. “They would want the firm’s brand image to be strengthened. They feel it’s important for staff to be very presentable, especially now that not only are they expected to have the technical knowledge, but they also need to be more interesting to talk to,” says Sze.

Enhancing the way staff look and behave has become increasingly critical to Hong Kong accounting firms as they seek to maintain an edge in today’s competitive business environment.

Last year, EY invited Sze to share her

expertise with its female professionals with the aim of encouraging their career advancement. Key topics discussed during her workshop included achieving the right balance of professional and stylish, cosmetic care tips for tired skin during peak seasons and quick-make-up advice for those with tight schedules.

“Technical skills are important but inevitably, the clients’ and other people’s first impression of you will include what you wear and how you look,” says Michael Wong, EY’s Greater China Talent Leader. “Dressing well is another way to give confidence to our clients and I even think it helps to build up the overall image of the profession as well.”

As Wong notes, paying extra effort

Jewellery to  
personalize  
the look

Make-up to subtly enhance  
facial features.

Suit: Black / Grey  
Beige / Burgundy /  
Navy

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into one's appearance at work can be beneficial for everyone. “Dressing well for our individual people helps to build their personal branding as well,” he says. “You are not only dressing well for the client or the firm, you are doing it for yourself. If you dress well, you feel good and more confident every day at work. That's why it's important.”

### New dress codes

For some firms, work clothes are not as formal today as they once were. “A few years ago, we were required to wear ties all day and dress formally,” says Ivan Chan, a Partner at Mazars Hong Kong and an Institute member. “Now, there's quite a lot of flexibility.”

With this relaxation in mind, most of Sze's clients go to her with the aim of pro-

jecting an image of their staff – and the company – as being capable yet up to date. “You can achieve this through your outfit, your make-up and your hairstyle,” she says.

Men's suits need not be black. Navy, different shades of grey and different textures such as tweed and wool can also be explored. Men are also urged to make work shoes a priority. “This is the most serious issue for corporate clients. They ignore the importance of the shoes. I always advise that they invest in sleek, streamlined footwear.”

Desmond Chan, a professional and executive image management trainer who is also an Institute member, recommends male CPAs to specifically have two to three suits for work and shirts in no more than three main colours, such as a light pink, pastel blue or white. “The rationale behind this rule is that in the corporate world, we don't want to emphasize too much on personal style. We want to emphasize team work.”

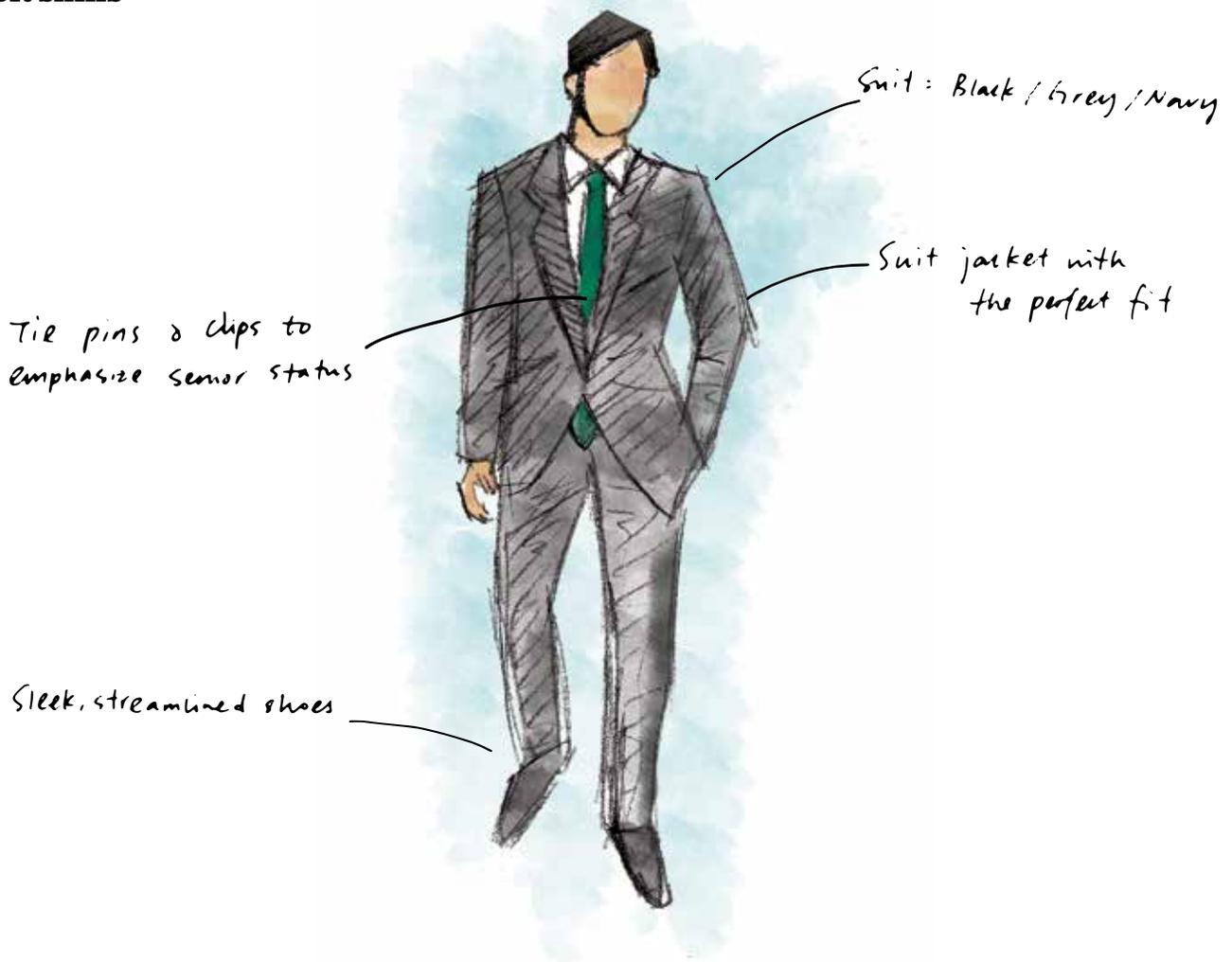
Using tie pins and tie clips as a way of underscoring the status of senior or high-level staff should also be considered. “It's a sort of non-verbal communication.”

For women, Sze points out that the range of colours to choose from for suits is broader than they think and includes black, grey, beige, burgundy and navy. She also urges them to not be afraid of accessories.

“Your colleague can wear the same suit as you but if you wear a chain necklace or pearls, the whole look changes,” she says. “You can add a vintage brooch before you go out or thin dangly earrings will do. It makes you more memorable and can be icebreaking as clients can ask about it.”

Of course, women shouldn't wear excessive amounts of make-up at work but instead use it to slightly enhance facial features. “It could be as simple as adding rose-coloured blush to cheeks or a bit of eyeliner and that's it,” suggests Sze.

## Soft skills



### Dressing down and up

How to dress up as a professional is an art, says Chan, but understanding how to dress to suit your job role is a good place to start.

Professionals, for instance, should avoid wearing items that would be better suited to their superiors, says Chan, who is CEO of Cell Therapeutics, a naturopathic company, and was Founding President of the Association of Image Consultants International.

"It's assumed that underdressing was the main problem [when it comes to dressing well at work] but nowadays, with younger professionals being able to afford better clothes, some would overdress," Chan says. "For example, they would wear an expensive watch or cufflinks that's far more sophisticated than what the boss is wearing."

While some firms have embraced more relaxed dress codes, many like Mazars still believe that formal first impressions can

be critical for fuelling strong relationships with clients.

"For the first meeting with a client, we always recommend that staff dress formally. Some clients, however, may be quite casual so we will try to accommodate their style," says Chan at Mazars. "This is quite important because if we are working with them, we shouldn't look very different from them."

For CPAs with hectic schedules, Sze suggests to aim for a daily look that's both professional and personalized. "I think enhancing your individuality can make you stand out," she says. "Of course, while most people would like to pursue that look, many just don't have enough time in the morning. But once their mindset changes, self-motivation will follow."

Eric Tong, Audit Partner at Deloitte and an Institute Council member, believes that CPAs should constantly make efforts to dress appropriately rather than stylishly. Focusing

on the cultural aspect of international dress codes is also important. "We are dealing with multinational clients, who all dress slightly differently," says Tong.

"If you go to a country, a lot of people may take off their jacket [in meetings], but if you meet those in another country, they may not," he observes. "So I think it's more about, how to dress appropriately as well as what's the right dress code for the client," he adds. "Our staff need to understand when to dress down, when to dress up, and when in doubt, always dress up."

### Model behaviour

Building up an intriguing professional image goes beyond what one should and shouldn't wear. It includes focusing on soft skills and etiquette. "Nowadays, people are getting more demanding. They don't just want to look at a professional's certificates, they want to look at them holisti-

cally, how you look, talk and behave like a professional.”

However, as Harry Wong, a neuro-linguistic programming trainer and Institute member, observes, some accountants are resistant to the idea of attending refresher courses that cover such skills. “Some CPAs do not realize the importance of learning new things because of the work experience they already have. But they come to realize that they are becoming more obsolescent every day because of factors such as technological advancements.”

Wong encourages both younger and senior Institute members to continuously learn. “Skill-wise, I think we’re technical enough. How to observe what’s going and be able to respond, those are what I call the soft skills,” he says.

Accounting firms such as Deloitte say they recognize the importance of soft skills. “Our profession involves motivating and managing a team,” says Tong. “We put a lot of emphasis on such skills, with internal courses for managers, senior managers, and even for partners.”

“One thing that is very important is negotiation skills,” he adds. “We always engage external consultants to help us with this. It’s an eye opener to have somebody in to cover human behaviour and go through how to communicate with different types of people.”

Having understood proper local etiquette is good for portraying a more positive professional image when working with clients and is important for both younger and senior professional accountants, notes Tong.

“How to conduct meeting in a western organization is very different to how you do it in a Chinese organization,” he says. [That’s why] we have internal courses that cover Chinese business etiquette: how to open up a conversation, what sort of topics you should talk about and table manners.”

As Wong notes, working on one’s personal and professional image as well as being open to changes are ways for accountants to stay proactive. “What more can you offer so that when the next promotion comes up, your name will be remembered and when the next redundancy process comes up, your name won’t be thought of?” he asks.

“The answer is simple,” he says. “Work smart by delegating work to spare extra time to chase new challenges.” **A**



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