



TONY BOCK

Consultant Anne Sowden, seen putting together a look at Moores on Yonge St., specializes in tweaking — or overhauling — your personal image.

Finishing School for Brutes

By: Robert Cribb Foreign

The suited and tied fortysomething businessman nibbles on quesadillas in a downtown Toronto eatery unaware his appearance is being dissected with surgical precision a few tables away.

"He needs new hair," image consultant Anne Sowden deadpans as her eyeballs scan him from his Ecco shoes to his Magic Cuts 'do.

"It makes his face look too long."

Upon closer inspection, he does bear a slight resemblance to the Muppet lab assistant Beaker.

Sowden's critique of another guy a table over with the open grey shirt and blue jacket — looking reasonably well put together to the average human eye — unfolds with Simon-Cowell-like relentlessness.

"The sleeves on the jacket are too short," she says with apparent bionic vision. "The shirt sleeve should show about a half-inch. He's showing two inches."

She's not done.

"I see a person but I don't see his face. A striped shirt would bring out his face. And a pocket square would step it up dramatically."

It's hard not to feel a bit self-conscious when you're lunching with a professional stylist. Especially when you realize you're not wearing a pocket square.

No sartorial faux pas goes unnoted, it seems.

And in this crowd of mostly male, business district diners – arguably the best dressed sampling of professional men in Canada – there's no shortage of offences to be scathingly noted.

When Sowden started her Here's Looking at You image consulting business in 2000, 90 per cent of her clients were women. Today, the gender split has evened out to about 50/50.

Paralyzed by the advent of "business casual" and the unscripted fashion freedom that came with it, men have turned in growing numbers to people like Sowden.

Most often, we call her in times of transition such as promotions, divorce, unemployment and dating phases.

In other cases, our bosses, identifying our grooming and fashion habits as serious impediments to our rise up the corporate ladder, call Sowden on our behalf and pay her to fix us.

Like the time a human resources manager asked her to work with a promising financial analyst whose technical brilliance was undermined by a level of slovenly personal disregard so epic it cost him promotions and threatened to push him off the management track.

It seems pocket squares can play a larger role in determining the course of your life's path than first considered.

"He didn't know what a coat hanger was," Sowden says.

That could be because he didn't really require coat hangers. The thirtysomething who lived at home with mom and dad only owned two pairs of pants, a pair of jeans, three shirts, one jacket and one pair of shoes.

None of it fit. All of it was wrinkled. Even the shoes.

As with all of her clients, Sowden first met him informally, got him to fill out a questionnaire on clothing and dressing tendencies, conducted a colour analysis and "wardrobe assessment" of his closet, then joined him at the mall for some hands-on shopping guidance.

That top-to-bottom image makeover rings in at between \$1,500 and \$2,000. Plan on spending another \$1,000 or more on clothing.

Sowden hooked Pigpen the Number Cruncher up with a new suit, three pairs of pants, shirts and ties.

Prediction: That top quality menswear is now piled up on his mom's floor somewhere.

In addition to threads, Sowden also works with clients on personal image skills such as eye contact, fidgeting, tone of voice and language.

Think of it as a kind of finishing school for brutes.

She will videotape your speaking habits and posture, then work to help you understand how others see you: A slouching, stuttering Hamlet on life's stage or a hands-on-your-waist, close-talking, aggressor Macbeth.

And me, I queried Sowden at the conclusion of our hour-long lunch?

"Very serious, focused, professional," she diplomatically concludes. "One way to be more approachable is to smile."

As if.

I did earn a rare Sowden seal of approval on one point. At the beginning of our meeting I had tucked my BlackBerry out of sight, an apparently rare and socially redeeming gesture in an age of technology-mediated rudeness, she says.

"It's unusual for two people to have a conversation anymore. You made me feel like you've got nothing better to do today than talk to me, like the rest of the room isn't there. That's an art form."

Noted.