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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Magazine

How politicians get camera-ready: Stylists and media training

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By Menachem Wecker

On a recent Wednesday afternoon, I found myself in a Washington Post studio dressed to the nines for a photo shoot. Thanks to Rosana Vollmerhausen and Brianna Thomas, of DC Style Factory, nary a crease nor wrinkle was apparent while every hair stood at attention. This was the culmination of an experiment I had undertaken to see how politicians get camera-ready. Over the previous week or so, I had chatted with two people who have coached candidates on public speaking and met with one of them in person for media training. I had also made appointments with two stylists, one to style me and the other to critique my wardrobe.

Image consultants can get a bad rap — in his announcement video, Trump primary challenger and former congressman Joe Walsh said he rejected advice to enlist an image consultant — but they are, for better or worse, a reality of American politics. By subjecting myself — a reporter with a face for print — to a makeover of sorts from these consultants, I hoped to better understand what it is like to walk a mile in the shoes of politicians who are under their tutelage. (Unfortunately, the actual shoes I was wearing — \$350 Magnannis — would, along with the rest of my \$1,404.50 ensemble, need to be returned to the store, so I was avoiding errant steps for fear of scuffing.)

I started my journey with Beverly Hallberg of District Media Group; she took me through 90 minutes of media training, during which I learned just how ill prepared for television I am. My first “on-camera” go earned me a C-minus from Hallberg, whose clients include members of Congress. Hallberg taught me to smile more; correct my gloomy eyebrow slope, which is better suited to saints being martyred in medieval paintings; speak louder and avoid trailing off; shorten my sentences; and nix excessive “you know” and “um” fillers. By the second take, I’d improved to a C-plus.

Rates for the kind of services Hallberg provides start at \$500 per hour. Her clients often fear initially that media training is meant to change them, and some consultants do try to turn clients into “a cookie-cutter reflection of whoever they think is the ideal spokesperson,” she told me. “What I want to make sure is that the camera doesn’t change who you really are as a person.”

My next stop was the Silver Spring, Md., home of Rosana Vollmerhausen, founder of DC Style Factory. Over two visits, she and stylist assistant Brianna Thomas spent a combined 2½ hours fitting me with looks they styled for the photo shoot. I learned to match socks to pants rather than shoes, and to pull my pants up a lot more.

Between my appointments with Vollmerhausen and Thomas, I met Lauren Rothman of consulting firm Styleauteur in my apartment, where I let her loose in my closet. She put my vulnerability at ease by being more cheerleader than sanctimonious critic. I was advised to ditch my signature uniform: blazer, polo shirt and jeans. “The blazer and the polo are two separate verticals,” she said. “It looks like you tried to do business casual.” (Her definition of business casual requires a button-down shirt, not a polo.) My pleated pants “add five to 10 pounds of weight in your seat, and that’s not something that you want,” she said. “What that says to me is that you probably haven’t bought slacks in a while.” (She wasn’t wrong.)

“You want to look accessible, but you don’t want to literally look like one of your constituents, because you’re a little elevated,” Vollmerhausen told me. “I’m a regular guy and a little better than a regular guy.” You can see that difficult balance on display in the 2020 Democratic primary — perhaps especially in the case of two of the style outliers on the stage. First, there’s Bernie Sanders’s shlumpy self-presentation. Hallberg thinks Sanders pulls off the bedraggled shtick authentically but wouldn’t coach clients to use his hand gestures or posture. To Rothman, Sanders is a throwback to a time when visiting your congressman’s office and seeing a mustard stain on his tie made him “relatable.”

Then there’s Andrew Yang’s much-talked-about no-tie gamble. Rothman believes his no-tie look broadcasts executive presence. “You’re having 14-hour days. There are different temperatures, and you’re just being efficient in your look,” she said. (For the record, no image consultant advised Yang to go tieless, said campaign press secretary Randy Jones. “It might be a better story if that were the case, but that isn’t the case.”)

On the public speaking front, some people are naturals but everyone needs help, said Sally Kohn, who has worked with politicians at all levels and was part of the team that prepared speakers for the 2016 Democratic National Convention. “The sort of mystery behind the curtain is that no one who seriously does this and certainly does this well ... has not been trained,” she explained. “I think it’s so healthy for our democracy to expose all that goes into politicians’ imagery.” As we chatted by phone, Kohn checked my Twitter avatar and pegged my aesthetic as “disheveled intellectual.” I wasn’t remotely offended.

In fact, conferring with all these consultants made me quite aware of why I’m more comfortable as a reporter than as a politician. The constant preening and tweaking means that running for office is the equivalent of every day being your wedding — with everyone fussing over you constantly. It must take nerves of steel and borderline megalomania to tolerate this situation over and over again. By contrast, the experience made me want to make myself smaller; rather than wanting to ascend increasingly prominent stages, I simply wanted to shrink into a corner.

And yet, I also ended up with a great deal of respect for both the politicians themselves and the consultants who shape them. To those who dismissively accuse polished politicians of being fake, I would note that “being fake” is hard work. Constantly putting one’s best foot forward — even in \$350 shoes — is frankly exhausting. It’s also exactly what we should want the leaders who represent us on a global stage to do. And if they need help making choices, they ought to ask for guidance, whether for global trade policy or belts.

Politicians have incentive to deny enlisting this help because many voters may view these services as tony. Having been through the process, however, I can clearly see its merits. I'm not running for office — but if I were, I would proudly pledge to make image and speaking consultants part of my inner circle.

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