

'Wear gray, carry green,' Molloy tells accountants

By Kathleen Moran
staff writer

The gray three-piece suit, white shirt and quiet unassuming tie were expected. But the man who advocates "dull" dressing wasn't a bit drab himself.

John T. Molloy, whose research on how clothing affects success in business has angered feminists and won over corporations, turned out to be a colorful, entertaining speaker with a constant gleam in his eye and a quip on his tongue.

The columnist and author was in Troy last week to address top managers and senior accountants from Deloitte Haskins & Sells. And for 2 1/2 hours, he had accountants from Saginaw, Grand Rapids and the Detroit area alternately laughing at his ridicule of polyester and squirming in their seats if they were wearing an "offensive" item of clothing.

Molloy's impact was obvious when "offenders" groaned or quietly squirmed when he proclaimed a piece of clothing inappropriate for success in the business world. The accountant wearing a white striped shirt laughed nervously when Molloy declared white-on-white shirts inappropriate for work, reserved for nighttime wear.

When Molloy proclaimed expandable watchbands as gauche, a gray-suited young man quietly tugged on his shirt sleeve to cover his. But another who was in the right, wearing a Cartier look-alike, smugly stretched his arm, pulling back his shirt sleeve enough to reveal he was in the know.

"When I put this suit on this morning, it was kind of in jest," said a man wearing a blue seersucker suit which didn't fit into Molloy's image of an executive. "But in our part of the state (Saginaw), things are less formal than here."

Whether it was the heat in the room or discomfort at wearing a bright plaid sport coat in a room filled with gray, another accountant quietly slipped off his green coat as Molloy told listeners they'd probably have to bury their polyester clothes, because they won't burn.

"THE ONLY REASON I can give you any advice at all is I am a researcher," Molloy said, emphasizing that all his opinions have developed from extensive research on the effect clothing has on people. "Every time I got a damn report, I had to throw something out," he said.

Dark, conservative dressing creates a visual image of a successful, credi-

ble, trustworthy and powerful business person, he said.

"Clothing has a socio-economic level which attaches itself to the wearer," Molloy found through his interviews and research projects.

For proof that dressing conservatively does give people a perception of success, look at those who hold powerful, prestigious positions, he said.

"The men who run America run it in blue, gray and dull."

The effect of clothing on success is an area he stumbled into as a bearded, sloppily dressed teacher, Molloy confessed. Through a quirk in circumstances, he became a research partner to a man who wanted to determine if the way a teacher dressed had any impact on effectiveness in the classroom. "I was out to prove I was a better English teacher than him and it didn't make a damn bit of difference what I wore."

Research proved, however, that the way a teacher dressed did influence success in the classroom. Teachers with authority problems could overcome them, at least in part, by dressing more formally.

Later, Molloy began advising a company that was on the losing end of cut-throat competition with IBM. When salesmen began wearing dark suits, white shirts and quiet ties, they were treated as professionals and sales increased. Research later showed that salesmen wearing beige raincoats were more successful than those wearing black raincoats because people associated black raincoats with blue collar workers rather than professional salesmen. Secretaries treated the salesmen more professionally when they were dressed in beige raincoats, thereby helping get the salesmen into bosses' offices.

By wearing dark suits, white shirts and tasteful, quiet ties, the business person eliminates some of the distractions and distrust which other types of clothing unconsciously create, he said. "If you look rich, people think you're competent."

THE SAME RULES apply for women as for men, he said. Research proved that women commanded less respect and authority in the business world because they wore an assortment of print dresses, bright colors, ruffles and high heels.

"The non-verbal message dominates, particularly for women," he said. Following the latest fashions won't help a businesswoman's career, but conservative dressing will, he said.

To one woman's complaint that finding appropriate suits is more difficult for women than men, Molloy offered the reassurance that at least two leading manufacturers will bring out full lines of women's suits within the next year. But in keeping with his philosophy of not advocating manufacturers or retailers, he didn't identify them.

While dressing dark works equally as well for women as men, there are definite contrasts. Gray hair tends to increase a man's credibility, but diminishes a woman's, Molloy said. Women can wear colored shirts, short-sleeved blouses and string ties, whereas men should stick to white or blue shirts, long sleeves and plain, dark ties.

Molloy's statements on the role a wife plays in her husband's career have often put him at odds with feminists and leading women's magazines, but all his statements are backed up by research, he said.

"When a company hires a man, it also hires his spouse, in a sense," Molloy argues. The woman who wants to help her husband's career should dress appropriately and establish a good relationship with wives of his business associates. Men do value their spouse's opinions, so the woman who antagonizes the wives of her husband's associates can hurt his career.

A career-oriented woman also has to be careful not to alienate wives of her husband's associates. "If you value his

career, don't play the successful executive businesswoman. It's better to play the housewife who works," Molloy said with a taunting look.

When roles are reversed, the application isn't as clear. The husband does play a factor in the working woman's career, but most businesses "don't know what they are looking for" in a corporate husband, he said.

OTHER MOLLOYISMS:

• Never wear green because people won't trust you. "I think that's why the Irish are poor."

• Women shouldn't wear sexy blouses or clothing. "You can't sell two products at the same time."

• Initials on shirt sleeves don't project the distinguished image that many think. Research showed 18 percent of those interviewed associated initial sleeves with "hooker bookers."

• Beige suits for summer work equally well for men and women, but light-colored ties should be avoided.

• All polyester shirts and print shirts should be avoided. The "wildest" a businessperson should get with shirts is a pin stripe.

• All facial hair is a negative — but even Molloy clings to his neatly trimmed mustache.

• A woman's hair should be medium or short in length, and not curly. "Farrah Fawcett isn't selling her brain."

*'If you look rich,
people think you're
competent.'*
—John Molloy



DWIGHT GENDROWSKI

John Molloy brought his philosophy on dressing for success to Troy last week, telling accountants: "The men who run America run it in blue, gray and dull."

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