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SHOP TALK
Ted Williams

Back to school time

There are three words that often strike fear or joy in the hearts of parents and little children alike – back to school.

For students, it's a time of new beginnings, new teachers, classes and friends and the end of lazy summer days.

For parents, it's the beginning of new routines, planning and shopping for school clothes and supplies.

And that last part means that, for retailers, this is among the busiest times of the year as parents look for apparel and accessories, shoes, electronics and school supplies.

For some, it is second only to Christmas.

After a slight drop last year, back-to-school spending is trending upwards in 2006, with the average Canadian family expecting to spend almost \$350 – about six per cent or \$20 more than in 2005, according to Diane Brisebois, president of the Retail Council of Canada.

In B.C. and Alberta, she added, spending is likely to be higher than the national average because of the booming economies in those provinces.

The last week in August and first week in September are traditionally the busiest times for back-to-school shopping, but this year it started in earnest last week, as some retailers began their advertising campaigns earlier than usual and this has had something of a snowball effect, even on those retailers whose advertising is just getting started.

Staples, for example, began its campaign about a week earlier than usual, and Future Shop actually started at the beginning of August, targeting the 25 per cent of Canadian parents who plan to buy electronics.

School supplies – the inevitable binders, No. 2 pencils and sheets of ruled paper – are on everyone's list, of course.

But laptops, MP3 players, printers, speakers, cellphones, digital cameras and the latest runners have all become essentials, or at least that's what any high

Building great impressions

Kimberly Law has built a successful business helping others fine tune their skills

Christina Myers
staff reporter

What's the difference between business dress and business casual? How casual is too casual? What kind of clothes make the most of your figure? How firm should a firm handshake be? What sort of etiquette should be followed while dining with the boss? Or with important clients? Or with friends?

Kimberly Law knows the answers – and she's made it her business to help others learn the same.

Law, a Burnaby resident, is the founder of Personal Impact, Image Management International, through which she provides image consulting – teaching people about etiquette skills and personal presentation – for clients that range from top corporations to non-profit organizations and stay-at-home moms.

And like most entrepreneurs who followed their passion and talents to find a unique niche, Law says she loves her work.

"I absolutely love doing it. I have a very diverse back-

"We've become a very relaxed society. But trends change, and I think that people are now becoming more aware and conscious of they present themselves."

ground, everything from cosmetics to real estate, and I've enjoyed those experiences, but this is definitely something I love doing."

In the late '90s, Law was in the midst of a career change and decided to take part in a career exploration program, which helped participants analyze their unique skills and interests.

Another woman in the program asked her if she'd ever heard of "image consulting" – at that time, a relatively fledgling field, particularly in Western Canada – and they started talking about it.

"I realized it was something that I'd be interested in. I could use the skills I had acquired in the past and I already had a lot of training that I needed," she says.

Her professional resumé was already impressive – including serving as business development coordinator with L'Oréal Canada, community relations coordinator with New Image Modelling and Acting School, and an instructor with Blanche McDonald – but she felt she needed to learn more.

So she spent more than a year developing new skills and took part in an entrepreneur program to help launch her ideas. In 1999, she officially "opened" her new business – and it's been booming ever since.

"It's evolved so much since I started, adding different services. I'm revamping things constantly," she says.

"It's a wide range of people that I work with. ... I've worked with everyone from



Kyle Hoobin/BURNABY NOW

Best foot forward: Kimberly Law helps individuals and organizations with skill development in etiquette, professionalism, building a personal image and more. She's pictured here in her Burnaby office.

people who come to me to increase their professionalism, to stay-at-home moms who are wanting to feel better about themselves.

"I do quite a few workshops for organizations, usually in the area of professionalism. (A company) would come to me about their needs, and I can put together a workshop – sometimes it may be a single employee that they are having a challenge with, or it may be a company-wide effort."

She offers such a wide variety of services, it's hard to define it under one banner. She has worked for large companies, leading group workshops on business etiquette, and with individuals, helping them over-

haul wardrobes or learn social etiquette.

She's coached people on professional protocol, self-presentation, dining etiquette, makeup, colour and grooming, and works with people on personal branding.

Many of these things – such as a handshake or knowing how to 'dress to impress' – are considered 'soft' skills, but Law says not to let the name mislead.

"I think over the last 20 years, we've become a very relaxed society. But trends change, and I think that people are now becoming more aware and conscious of how they present themselves, and employers are as well. People come to me for a lot

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WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 23, 2006

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Men's work wardrobe a succinct one-word suggestion — suits

From D1

dress professionally for all occasions.

"We're a consulting firm, so we felt we really needed to look like we acted, to project an image of professionalism," Caron said in an interview. "And clients noticed it. We hear comments that we look professional. No one looked tacky [before], but [dress] wasn't consistent. And staff were wondering, what's appropriate? [Law] looked at everything. Shoes were a big thing. Some came in in sandals and those can be distracting for clients. It looks like they're heading to the beach, rather than work."

And what's right for men at his company? "Men are easier. In one word... suits."

Caron said his company is considering organizing social outings, including a company picnic, and would likely circulate Law's rules on "what not to wear at the company picnic" to employees.

"It provides some good pointers. The goal would be to avoid embarrassment."

Caron said that the guidelines make sense, because he recalls some less-than-appealing sights at other

past experience, I certainly saw some women showing up with something a little too revealing. And sometimes it's scary what a man views as casual. Some of us have legs that shouldn't see the light of day."

In the meantime, he said, the recent heat wave has him looking into what would be an appropriate summer wardrobe for doing business.

Joy McLean, career coordinator for Blanche MacDonald Centre, said in an interview that Law is absolutely right that dressing appropriately for picnics is critical in the business world.

"Small things make huge differences in a career," said McLean, whose company teaches hundreds of students about fashion merchandising and design. "Enjoy yourself, but be aware it's a company function."

McLean said their students need help transitioning from fashion to the business world. "One thing on the wish list in the business world is an awareness of proper dress in all categories, including casual occasions. That [company picnics] is where they make their biggest mistakes."

Image: Many 'soft skills' have been lost

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of different reasons, but I think people are starting to realize that a lot of the 'soft skills' are really critical."

She says many people have simply never had much guidance in those areas and aren't sure what's appropriate.

"Some people come to me for education. They really feel that they want to learn how to do it themselves," she says.

And, lately, there's been an increase in the number of parents who have come to her looking for help in instilling etiquette skills in their children.

"I think there's more of an awareness now than there was even five years ago that our society has become a little too relaxed," she says.

For example, she says many people aren't familiar with the proper way to do a handshake, or how to make an introduction, or general dining etiquette — which may be OK at home or on the beach but won't fly at a business dinner or other professional gathering.

Learning these things can help her clients put their best foot forward and make that all-important first impression. More importantly, she says, it can be a huge boost to an individual's confidence.

"You just see people really bloom when they're feeling confident about themselves and about their skills," she said. "It's really rewarding to see."

Law is a member of the Association of Image Consultants International and was the first association-certified image consultant in Western Canada.

The field, she says, is a growing one as people become more aware of the importance of making that all-important first impression.

And, as one of her own favourite phrases suggests: 'A good image never goes out of style.'

For more information, see www.personalimpact.ca or call 604-298-7228.

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