

Style counsel

Desmond Wong reviews a book that helps men navigate their way through sartorial minefields and develop their own personal look

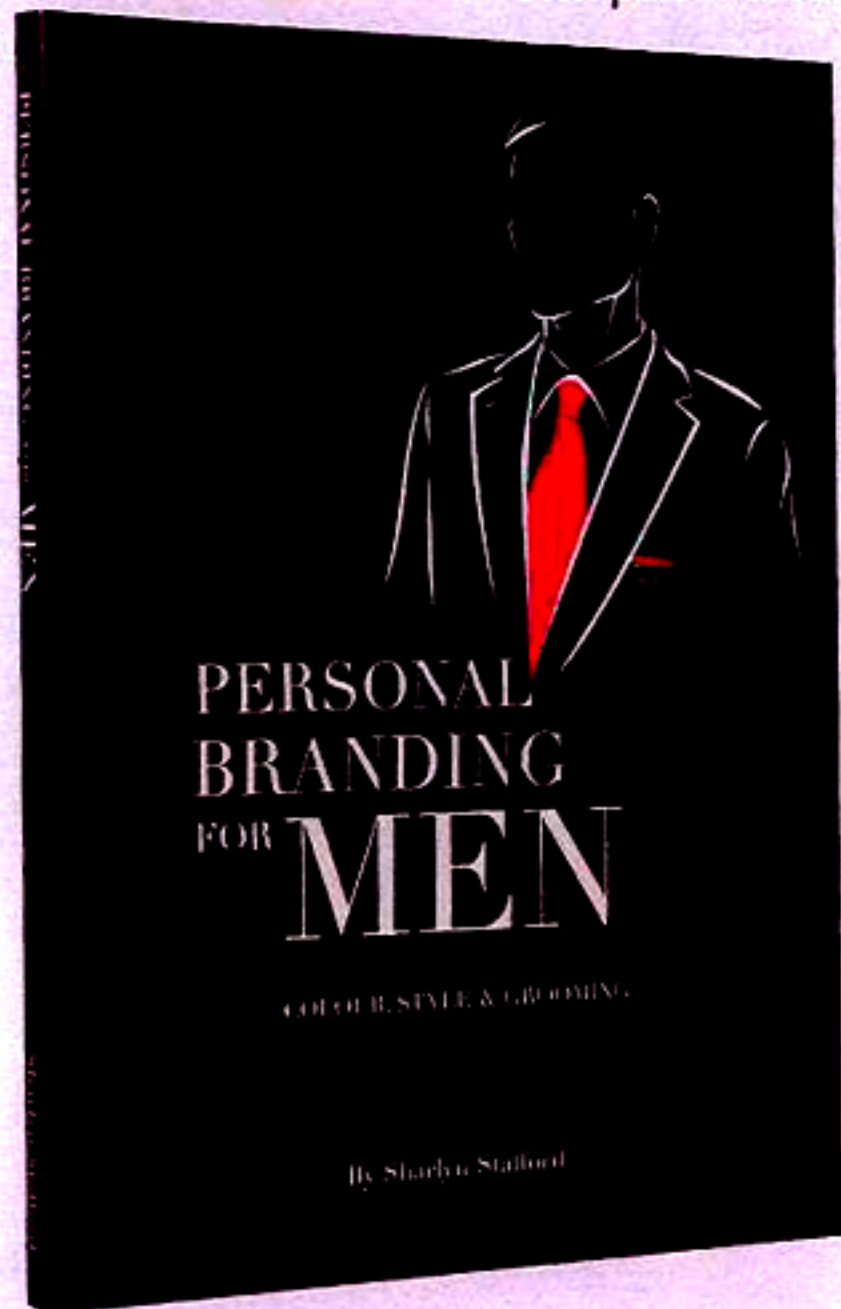


Image is, for better or worse, everything. Sharlyn Strafford knows this all too well, and has taken the effort to deliver the basics of looking good to the more hirsute members of humanity, men.

Personal Branding for Men: Colour, Style & Grooming is a stripped down, basic manual on how a man should dress for success, and project to the world they are ready to make it their oyster. In this sense, *Personal Branding* is useful, handy and curiously inconclusive.

In being useful, *Personal Branding* covers two areas. How to look right, and how to look wrong. Through a fairly comprehensive examination of basic male body types, hair cuts, neck lengths and most importantly head shapes, Strafford shows how to avoid the common gaffes that one encounters in business dressing. Mistakes like wearing trousers cut too short, or mismatching colours are addressed, but the most informative are the examinations on what goes well with your features, height or body shape. As such, one learns to avoid collars that make one look like an ostrich, or jackets that are cut too broad for one's shoulders and waist, no matter how much a fan of *Miami Vice* one used to be. A comprehensive colour guide is included, to allow individuals to pick the appropriate colours to match their skin tone, hair and eye colour.

Other basic survival tips that Strafford has included are things like how to tie a bow tie, or what certain occasions demand of one's wardrobe. As such, any reader will be well versed in how to dress for a casual, formal, semi-formal or smart-casual occasion. With any luck, this will eradicate the sight of people in polo t-shirts at weddings, and open-necked long-sleeved shirts at formal occasions. Also critical, is the point that a man's belt ought to match his shoes, a fact that women are well aware of, but men frequently forget.

Beyond these essential elements, *Personal Branding* becomes handy by filling in the

basic gaps in wardrobe lore that men tend to ignore, like how to wear a coat with tails, and more importantly, what is a coat with tails. What is a lapel? What's the difference between a barrel cuff and a French cuff? A sports jacket and a blazer can now be told apart from each other. All the little things you never knew about menswear that you finally can talk a little more intelligently about.

Inexplicably though, given the significant amount of information about the components of the essential male wardrobe, much of it is inconclusively left without context. It's great to know that the material for jackets comes in several varieties, but it would also help if one knew what they did for the jacket, or more importantly, what it would do for you if you were to, for example, wear a herringbone print. Instead, one just ends up knowing what certain things are, and *Personal Branding* leaves it at that, instead of tying it with some of the useful concepts it deals with. A confusing development, given the amount of space devoted to these interesting but homeless facts.

Ultimately, one has to remember that *Personal Branding* is a survival guide it just contains the absolute basics. As such, most of what is useful, one should already know (there is a section that insists on the reader showering, shaving and combing their hair). On what is handy, *Personal Branding* remains inconclusive. Subsequently, the book at times seems less than essential, and really is only about the obvious basics. Of course, this raises a more disturbing possibility. Men have forsaken the given essentials, and Strafford has had no choice in resorting to a scorched-earth approach in teaching men what they should never have forgotten in the first place. If male fashion awareness has genuinely dropped to this Neanderthal low, one can only be ashamed of their Y chromosome. ■

Personal Branding for Men: Colour, Style & Grooming is available at bookstores