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STYLE

Old-school tricks for grown guys

Men who are colorblind--or fashion phobic--can look great without thinking much at all

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Fashion has never been John Paul Bitting's strong suit. In grade school, he wore a uniform. In college, he didn't care. But when he started his first real job, working for a major Chicago financial services firm, he knew his laissez-wear attitude had to change.

"I was dealing with clients all day," he said. "I didn't want to be the guy in the brown suit with black shoes and a black tie."

Small problem: Bitting, 28, is colorblind. He has difficulty differentiating between certain colors, especially blue and purple. Also troublesome are reds and browns, oranges and yellows and some shades of greens and browns, he said.

So Bitting asked for help from longtime friend Lindsay McKay, a professional wardrobe stylist and owner of men's clothing store TK Men in Bucktown. McKay gave Bitting a total wardrobe overhaul that essentially took the thinking out of his dressing -- and guaranteed that he'd not only match, but look good to boot.

"We kept things very basic," McKay said. "He has black suits and he has navy suits, and he knows

which is which because the brands are different. All of his pinstriped shirts are blue, so he knows to only wear those with the navy suit; all the solid shirts can go either way." Shoes are also kept simple. Bitting wears black dress shoes for work, white Converse for play.

This streamlined approach to style isn't something McKay created out of whole cloth. It's a well-known trick of the trade that fashion industry professionals say can get any guy on the road to sartorial self-sufficiency. Even guys who wear tube socks with dress pants and dress shoes -- something stylist Robin Baab has actually seen. (Hint: Socks and pants should be the same color.)

Begin by enlisting the help of someone whose style you trust, said Baab, who divides her time between the Chicago and Los Angeles offices of The Image Studios. The goal is to assess the entire closet, pare it down and organize what's left.

"Guys tend to wear the same things," Mc-Kay said. "They'll have a few favorites and those always get worn because they always end up on the top of the pile."

From there, utilize that fashionista friend and start mixing and matching pieces to create outfit options. When Baab does this for her clients, she takes Polaroid photos of each grouping and creates a portfolio for them. She also has been known to mark tags with different shapes so clients can just look for all the pieces with, say, a diamond on them to create a coordinated look.

Developing a system for how clothing's organized in the closet also can help guys stay stylish, Baab said. "You can do this a number of ways, depending on how your closet is laid out," she said. "You can group by color family -- browns are together, blacks are together -- or if you have two racks, you can use one for shirts and one for pants, organizing vertically by color."

1 good starter suit

And if the paring-down process has left that closet with little more than an echo, it's time to rebuild, starting with the basics. For the office, begin with a charcoal gray suit in a worsted fabric or 100 percent wool, said John F. Moran, co-owner of the bespoke Oak Street haberdashery, George Greene.

"Charcoal gray will take you anywhere," said Moran, who began his menswear career in London, on Carnaby Street and Kings Road. Then add shirts, ties and a brown shoe. Casual workdays require flat-front trousers, and the jeans/suit jacket/open-necked shirt combo is also classic, he said.

McKay suggests this no-fail outfit for hanging out or going out: black T-shirt, black belt, jeans and Puma tennis shoes. "Pumas are hands-down some of the most stylish, most versatile casual footwear," she said. "My dad even wears them, and he's 65 years old."

What's always off limits? Sweats and track suits worn anywhere but home and the gym, Moran said. "If you see people wandering around like that, they're usually tourists and it's a bloody eyesore."

If it seems like a lot to remember, Moran promises it's worth it. "The way you take care of yourself is an attribute of your personality, and you need to take note of it, take control of it and, if you must, improve

upon it."

3 take-home tests

1. Check your pant length, stylist Robin Baab says. "Guys tend to think if they can button their pants, they're still acceptable, but the pant leg hem should come to about a half-inch from the ground in the back with shoes on. In the front, it should cover about two-thirds of the shoe."
2. If an article of clothing hasn't been worn in a year, get rid of it, advises Lindsay McKay, owner of the Bucktown clothing shop TK Men.
3. For ties, the statute of limitations on wear is three years, McKay says.

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