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Here's looking at you, kid

Sexy or sober?

To figure it out, our intrepid reporter consults the image doctor.

By Massie Ritsch, Times Staff Writer



Just be yourself, dear. What Mom really meant as she nudged you toward your first date: Just be your brand.

If Chevys are "like a rock" and State Farm is "like a good neighbor," why not let out your "boy next door"? Or be a sailor of tall ships. The ideal running mate. An urban leprechaun.

Sam Christensen identifies these "personal brands" the way an adman might. The

former Hollywood casting director has designed a technique that helps his clients answer a question the self-help business rarely asks and one most people take to their grave: What does everyone think of me?

Christensen calls his life's work "Sam Christensen Image Design Process." The patent is pending.

He is not a stylist. He is in the personal marketing business. If you understand how others see you, he believes, you're more likely to be a success. In hair and wardrobe make-overs, he says, "what we're making over to is some standard that somebody else invented. It leaves out what ultimately is our biggest asset, which is our individuality."

Christensen hatched his method 12 years ago to get his actor friends the head shots that better conveyed the personalities he knew well. Now, professionals from a variety of industries come to his darkened North Hollywood studio -- not to reinvent themselves, but to learn how to capitalize on what they've already got.

Passing through the studio's narrow lobby, where actors' photos are displayed like high art, each client plops into a chair for the first exercise but says nothing. Christensen, several graduates of his program and the rest of the class -- maybe eight or so students -- start checking off adjectives to describe the person they are seeing for the first time.

"All we're trying to mimic is the daily scrutiny that we're put under," Christensen says.

When I took the chair recently, in my eyeglasses and khakis, the class' smart-kid bells started ringing. "Intelligent" registered with all 13 of my evaluators. There was also strong agreement for "intellectual," "analytical," "logical" and "hard-working."

In short, I didn't strike people as a fun guy.

Christensen's classes quickly progress to conversation designed to discover an individual's vibe and capitalize on it. Facing a video camera, students share their

biographies, fantasies and quirks while their classmates react on note cards. When I described my morning ritual of slicing fruit on cereal, one classmate found me "comfortable," another "collegiate" and a third thought of the Dewey Decimal System.

I was gunning for "sexy," and still no one saw it.

As for Christensen, he is 54 and fit, with a tidy gray beard. Talking with his hands, he lectures from a tall director's chair. He unabashedly name-drops from his career as a casting director -- television's "MASH" is among his bigger credits -- and as a talent manager and promoter of theater and musicians. In his office, a full shelf of his bookcase is occupied by dictionaries and thesauri. Just as I must have strawberries on my Rice Krispies, Christensen compulsively makes beds.

He has led more than 5,400 people through his image process. Each session runs four intense days or, for those who have the time, a leisurely four weeks. At \$695 per student, Christensen has made plenty of money counseling actors. Lately, prodded by partner Ken Cortland and other alumni, the guru with the dull sense for business has realized he is sitting on a gold mine. All of us, Christensen has discovered, are as curious about ourselves as starlets are.

Corporations pay for their managers to see him. Salespeople enroll to figure out why they can't close the deal. And recently Christensen has started counseling members of two groups renowned for being hung up on their images: teenagers and politicians. "The bottom line is, it doesn't matter what you do," he says. "Sooner or later, you -- your personality, your own impact -- comes into play."

Christensen's thinking about personal image and branding draws from Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, Joseph Campbell's observations on universal mythology, and the mystique machine of the old movie studios. Society casts each of us into a role, Christensen posits, and no one will believe us if we play somebody else.

"There's some stuff everybody just knows [about us], and we might as well deal with it." Christensen says.

If we acknowledge our roles -- that is, our images or personal brands -- and capitalize on them, we can achieve what Christensen calls a "charismatic moment" by demonstrating to others that we have accepted ourselves.

Christensen laments those he could have helped.

"I think Richard Nixon would still be the president if he had come up and said, 'You know, look, I'm quick, I'm shifty, I will do anything it takes to make it work.' "

If Al Gore were to take Christensen's course, he would notice the comments about him falling into categories. Surely there would be a "stiff" plank, Christensen thinks. And maybe a "grandstanding" one too.

My own list of themes sounded like a warped variation of watchwords I had recited in Boy Scouts: I am sophisticated, grounded, quick-witted, guarded, logical, hard-working, decent, well behaved, intellectual and efficient. I am charming, regular, aloof, pedantic, shy, thoughtful, comfortable and judgmental.

(My facilitator misspelled that last one, but I decided it was too in-character for me to tell him.)

The themes led to phrases that Christensen calls "essences." These summarizing statements are supposed to allow us to talk about ourselves truthfully with new acquaintances, in job interviews, at auditions, on dates, wherever.

Christensen and his facilitators brainstorm to develop students' essences, drawing from classmates' feedback and their own talents for pithy phrases and mots justes. A back-and-forth with the student ensues to pick the most apt and comfortable seven.

Here are mine:

Your parents will love me.

Spontaneity by appointment.

Valedictorians are the best kissers.

Attuned to the ebb and flow.

By invitation only.

Still considering all the options.

Of course, I could be wrong.

To people who know me, several of these statements resonate strongly. My friends say they love "spontaneity by appointment," and cite as evidence my hobby: performing improvisational comedy. That's the time during the week I set aside to behave however I want and be surprising. Then I go back to being "by invitation only."

Everyone in my class seemed mostly satisfied with their essences. Tom, a German actor with a regal countenance, "loves baby ducks and they love me." To those of us who had watched Tom for four days, that phrase fit him perfectly. To Tom, it clarified an aspect of his personality. To anyone else, it sounds like nonsense.

A few days after the class let out, my skepticism kicked in. True to my essences, I started "considering all the options." How was my descriptive package any different than an astrological sign that purports to classify one-twelfth of the world's people? I like baby ducks, too.

"In the horoscope," Christensen explained, "you're not given the opportunity to choose." Meaning, I figure, that I can choose to describe myself as "self-reliant" rather than "aloof."

I continued to test Christensen's assertion that regardless of where we are or who we're with, our image stays consistent. It did -- I drew the same adjectives from my sister as I did from high school students in a journalism workshop. As I walked away from a bar one night, a raggedy guy caught up with me, and before he could even ask for money, he read what everyone else apparently sees in my face.

"Whoa, brainiac!" he said. And that earned him a dollar.

With all this confirming research, I figured I needed to embrace my brand. I don't

waste time guessing what others think about me. I am more accepting of my lot in life. I pay attention to when I need to turn up one aspect of my brand or turn it down.

I typed out my essences -- all that is both appealing about me and is not -- and carry them in my wallet. Naturally, it bothers me that the slip of paper is not laminated.

I think these cryptic phrases are giving me new clarity and confidence.

Of course, I could be wrong.