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Clothing business seems to be fitting for Dardis

■ At 31, he has started a professional clothing company to complement his 5-year-old corporate training business

By Sharon Baltes

It was never Greg Dardis' intention to start a clothing company; he was kind of forced into it.

As part of a training program focusing on professional image that Dardis offers through his primary business, Dardis Communications, clients constantly asked him for wardrobe advice. In response, he decided earlier this year to use his knowledge of clothing to start a second business, Dardis Clothiers.

"Part of leadership presence - how you look and sound like a leader - is how you dress," Dardis said. "Clothing is something that kept coming up in our training, and we needed to learn it."

Shortly after starting Dardis Communications five years ago in Chicago, Dardis recognized the strong connection between clothing and professional image.

"People make an impression of you within the first seven seconds of meeting you," he said. "If you are doing something wrong in your attire, people will focus on it."

Over the past nine months, he has immersed himself in learning about all aspects of the clothing industry, from the characteristics of different fabrics to clothing production. In January, he launched Dardis Clothiers, selling men's clothing

online through his Web site, www.dardisclothiers.com, and through a "wardrobe on wheels" service that brings clothes to his clients. He plans to add women's clothing at a later date.

Dardis Clothiers offers ready-made items, such as dress shirts, trousers, suits, ties and sports coats, and also custom-made clothing. Custom items take about four to six weeks to produce. Dardis said most of his business is handled face-to-face with clients as a time-saving measure for busy executives who don't have the time or desire to shop.

"What we do is totally different than a brick-and-mortar store, where people come in out of desperation because they need something to wear the next day," Dardis said. "Our customers are trying to think more strategically about their wardrobe and how it affects their presentation and image."

So far, Dardis said, his clothing customers have ranged from college students to CEOs of Fortune 100 companies. Most of these clients learn about the business through a Dardis Communications training session.

"We videotape people as part of our training programs, and it's like putting a microscope on them," Dardis said. "It magnifies when somebody is doing something right or wrong with their attire."

Dardis and the other 13 people in his company are acutely aware of what it's like to be under the microscope. In teaching people how to look their best and carry themselves with confidence, they become walk-



Photo by Duane Tinkey

Launched earlier this year, Dardis Clothiers is an extension of the professional image training that Greg Dardis offers as part of his primary business, Dardis Communications. The company sells business attire for men.

ing demonstration pieces for the messages they deliver.

"People always ask me to pull up my pant leg to see my socks, or they ask why I chose a particular tie that day," Dardis said. "We can't be telling people to dress one way and not doing it ourselves."

Dardis, 31, got his start as an entrepreneur in 2002. After working for about three years for a training company in Chicago, he decided to set out on his own and start a business focusing on professional image, selling skills and presentation skills. In the early days, Dardis was conscious of his age, and he made a point of dressing "to look older," sometimes even wearing three-piece suits. He stopped just short of dyeing his hair grey.

The Farley native had always intended to return to his home state, and after starting Dardis Communications, he began calling on potential clients in Iowa. Principal Financial Group Inc. was among his first Iowa clients, followed soon after by Pioneer Hi-Bred International Inc., Wells Fargo & Co. and others.

In 2004, Dardis and his wife, Tonya, relocated to Greater Des Moines. Dardis Communications still operates a Chicago office, and Dardis is looking for office space around Des Moines to move operations from his Johnston home. His business is growing, and serves international clients such as Hilton Hotels Corp., Procter & Gamble Co., Deere & Co. and United Airlines.

Eva Quinn, Principal's second vice president of corporate relations, said her company has hired Dardis Communications numerous times for training, including a department-wide professional image program for her department. Some of her staff even opted for personal consultations with Dardis, wardrobe assessments with him paying a visit to their

homes and one-on-one shopping trips and salon visits.

"We didn't even have a big problem starting out, but we saw immediate improvements in the way that people dressed and with their confidence level," Quinn said. "It was a lot of fun, and we're in the middle of planning another one of these right now."

Quinn said it helps having an outside person talk to employees when you're dealing with a sensitive topic like how they're presenting themselves.

"For most people, it's a sensitive topic, and Greg handles it in a very diplomatic way," Quinn said.

The fact that Dardis is doing what he does today is surprising, considering he was so afraid of giving a presentation during high school that he took an "F" rather than talk in front of his peers.

"That fear drove me nuts," Dardis said. "My passion for what I do came from dealing with that fear."

Determined to improve his comfort level with giving presentations, Dardis signed up to sell books door-to-door in the South during college. Not only did it help overcome his fear of communications, but it helped to pay his way through college at Buena Vista University, where he studied marketing and corporate communications.

Dardis attributes some of his early success to skills honed during his years working in Chicago, but he said his Iowa roots are the real driving force behind what he does.

"There is such a big need for what we do here," he said. "I have worked all over the world, and I see people in other parts of the country dressed to a 'T.' The brainpower that we have here is second to none, but we may be missing out on opportunities because we are afraid to stand up in a meeting and speak our minds or we haven't been taught how to present ourselves." □

A few hints on 'professional image'

Dardis sees many recurring themes in the missteps that professionals make with their wardrobe or appearance. Here are a few of the common offenses:

MEN:

1. Wrong color of shoes. A lot of men will wear black shoes with a navy suit, when a better choice would be cordovan or burgundy.
2. Wrong socks. They will wear socks that match their shoes, not their pants. Socks should match the pants as an extension of your pants. Also, socks should be long enough to cover the calf so that no leg hair shows.
3. Pants that are too short or too long.

WOMEN:

1. Too much or not enough makeup. Same with jewelry.
2. Distracting hairstyles. You don't want your hair in your face if you are presenting. Also, a good rule of thumb for choosing hairstyles is that the older you get, the shorter your hair should get.
3. The pant and shoe connection: Women will buy pants that fit one type of heel, and then they're too short with a higher heel.
4. Clothing that is too tight.

