

Dress to impress

By Rick Moorman

I often deal with expats, businessmen temporarily stationed in the Netherlands who often try, in their own way, to understand Dutch customs and attempt to integrate smoothly into our society.

The nice thing about them is that they look in at our Dutchmen from outside, and if you talk to them, you can get a good idea about how we are thought of abroad.

I recently had a chat with Dragan Culic, a successful businessman from the former Yugoslavia who's in the process of setting up a successful business here in the Netherlands. I have the honour of helping him out from time to time with clothes and every time I see him, he talks about his surprise in seeing what, in his eyes, are typically Dutch habits. A good example from Dragan is his surprise at the apparent openness of the Dutch. Walk through any apartment complex and you can look inside everywhere. The windows are, at most, only partially obscured, and we insist that this is because we have nothing to hide.

He also can't understand the way that we, when inside a company, hardly ever dare to talk about style. The Calvinist behaviour of the Dutch is something you see even in clothes. The motto seems to be 'keep it simple' or 'accept me as I am,' but in the international business world, it simply doesn't work that way. Dragan says it right: if you go to work for KLM, you know you are going to dress a certain way and you don't fight it. Why fight it in business?

His explanation for the poor sense of style in the average corporate work comes from his first experiences in the Netherlands. Arriving at the station, he literally broke his neck falling over the countless bicycles parked there. "Logical," he thought, that the Dutch pay no attention to style. Going through rain and wind every day on your bike demands practical clothes. There is something to that, of course, but if I point out that the middle management of our companies, who drive every day, can and should pay more attention to what they wear, his answer is even simpler: "You would expect them to, but you often find that Dutch people simply think they shouldn't stand out, and he sticks to the biking culture even if he drives."

Honestly, I can see his point, and would like to ask that, since we cannot seem to change the Dutch clothing culture – or lack thereof – from within, that we appeal to all the foreign businessmen and managers to give us all a helpful push in the right direction from outside.

In short, dear expats, help us to see that in our businesses, we need to dress more internationally, and are badly in need of a new kind of development aid that will get the right discussions going.

It would make my life a little easier.

Rick Moorman operates clothing stores in the Netherlands and Belgium. He gives advice and readings on the importance of clothing in the business world