

THE WORKING RICH

JOHN WEITZ

IMAGE OF
DISTINCTION

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Photo by Anthony Edgeworth



His valet helped him into his John Weitz blazer. "Yes?" he said, "to what do I owe the honor of this visit?" I spotted the gun bulging under the valet's black jacket. I said, "Sorry to disturb you but I was looking for the"

You are in a taxi in New York City, stopped for traffic behind a bus, diesel exhaust blasting into the taxi windows. Through the haze, you see the above, written on an advertising placard. You read it once. Traffic moves. A truck comes between you and the bus. What do you remember?

John Weitz. You might finish the sentence, or create a dramatic denouement, in which, in your mind, you are wearing a John Weitz blazer. You know, without thinking about it, that the blazer is classic, impeccably tailored, comfortable, and somehow right.

How do you know? Because this is the image that has been part of multimillionaire John Weitz's marketing strategy for years. Quality construction. Quality fabric. Quality fit. Even if you've never owned a single John Weitz garment, you know you couldn't go wrong if you did.

The message is clear, and it has everything to do with the man whose name triggers the response. He was one of the first men to appear on the International Best Dressed List, and was later voted to its Hall of Fame.

He is a photographer. His first exhibit, "Manhattan Faces," is now owned by the Museum of the City of New York. He's a writer. His books have ranked high on the best-seller lists.

He has run ads featuring himself in his Austin Healey 100-4, his Ferrari Boxer BB512i, his Cadillac Fleetwood Brougham, his Ferrari Testarossa, and his 1952 J2x Allard. He has designed a car — not just the interior, the entire car. It is now on permanent exhibit in the Crawford Auto-Aviation Museum of the Western Reserve Historical Society. He has several designs in the Smithsonian Institution.

He was an internationally licensed amateur race car driver. He has sailed both cruising and competition races.

He has won the major fashion awards — the Coty award, the Cartier Award, and, most recently, the Cutty Sark Achievement Award.

He has won countless other awards. The most personally meaningful is the Mayor's Liberty Medal, which he received last year. He was educated at The Hall School and St. Paul's, London, and at Oxford.

He served the United States, ultimately as captain, in Army Intelligence and is on the Board of Veterans of the O.S.S.

He serves on charity boards such as Phoenix House and the Raoul Wallenberg Committee, and he belongs to clubs such as the Union, the Naval Academy Sailing Squadron, East Hampton and Sag Harbor Yacht, and the Beach Club, Palm Beach.

Mostly, he is a fashion designer who was a licensing pioneer before most designers knew what the word meant. It has paid off. His company sells \$250 million worth of merchandise each year.

Even if you know only two or three bits of

the above biographical data, you know that this man is not Crazy Eddie, Earl Schiebe, or Frank Perdue. When he appears in his own ads, it is not as huckster, shill or blatant product-pusher.

The John Weitz image incorporates the understated elegance, the humor, the wit, and savvy that can put him on the rear end of a bus and make you want to wear his clothes.

Is it real? Yes. The man is not a myth, but neither is he particularly impressed with himself. His attitude, although more eloquently expressed than Popeye's "I yam what I yam," is that honesty is critical to credibility, and his credibility is a key criterion for what he sells.

In essence, with quality and fashion-rightness as the givens, the rest is in the packaging. In the case of John Weitz the contents have substance that would seem to be totally reliable to his customer.

"I can't be sold as the man who does the fluffiest lingerie in America," he says. "I know fully well that I can't do certain things, and I know, with a careful and measured degree of understanding, what people are willing to swallow about me."

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In Japan, a major Weitz market, it would appear they're willing to swallow a tad more than we do here.

"In their ads, the Japanese project me as James Bond, with derring-do and great adventure. I assume this is to show men that I am a man's man!"

Image may be important, but there's no dressing up the realities of the business end of fashion, and Mr. Weitz is that industry's resident expert on translating the image into dollars and cents. With 20 licensees marketing John Weitz merchandise from jackets to socks, he remains on the top of the list of revenue-generating designers.

"The first thing to recognize in any business situation is that you can count upon the legitimate self-interest of each party and the logistics of whose greed goes where.

"When it becomes tough is when there is a designer with a name and a potential licensee who could make millions, but he wants to put your name in an inexpensive line of stores. This may dent your name in other quarters. Your back pocket is yearning, but your brain is saying 'no!'"

That's one balancing act. The other is what it really means to be a designer.

"It's a combination of business and psychological wisdom. Eventually, a fashion designer is not scissors and snips and snaps."

A designer, one infers, is eventually a business, a name and an aura.

"Look at Christian Dior. He's been dead for 30 years, but no one thinks about that. His name goes on and on."

What perpetuates the success of a designer? The same factors that perpetuate the success of anything that becomes more than a fad and achieves permanence in the marketplace.

"The first constituency," explains Mr. Weitz, "is the opinion maker — the person who says, 'That's a smashing dress. . . he's a brilliant designer.' If the telling comes from the right mouths, then somehow the statement is credible.

"The second is the part that is able to do something with us. I rarely 'show' my merchandise. I don't believe it's necessary. Clothes aren't that important. Dressing is instinctive and the purpose of fashion is simply to allow someone to identify himself with a group he either belongs to, perceives himself as belonging to, or would like to belong to.

"Within that context, what's important is how clothing is used. When I make a navy blue blazer, I say to myself, 'This could be useful to a guy who works in a bank in Omaha because you don't need to wear a 'banker's suit' there today.

"If that man uses that jacket, and it fits well, and it's in a fabric that doesn't wrinkle too badly, then we have a customer who becomes the second part of an ongoing constituency."

Fabric obviously is an integrated part of any design, and the right fabric can be a major selling point, like the "365 cloth" to be featured in Mr. Weitz's Palm Beach Line. Why "365"? Because it can be worn 365 days a year. Ron Lopp, major corporate fashion consultant, feels this is a major breakthrough in menswear and will be certain to recommend it to his customers.

"It's absolutely on target, which is par for John Weitz designs," Mr. Lopp says.

Mr. Weitz relates to how the body moves. "Modern clothes must be featherweight, easy to pack. They must contour themselves to the body without heavy interlining or darting or stiff fabrics. Function must always precede fashion, and I am as interested in construction as in styling."

Mr. Weitz does not expound on his philosophies from New York's Seventh Avenue, the hotbed of designer work and showrooms. Rather, his spacious, comfortable and very elegant office is located on upper Madison Avenue, with windows overlooking the park, the glass and steel office buildings, and shoppers visiting rows and rows of chic boutiques below. There is nary a pushcart or garment rack in sight.

Mr. Weitz gives assistance to new, young designers. Often they write, asking him how to start, and what to do. His advice: "Just do it. Begin. Make a start." ■