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## Times 2 - features

January 23, 2004

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### Ice queen to woman next door: how not to look like a million bucks

By Nicholas Wapshott in New York

The Martha Stewart in court this week accused of fraud is different from the Martha Stewart familiar to millions of Americans from her home-making empire - thanks to a million-dollar makeover by psychologists and image experts aimed at swaying the jury

SHE HAS SPENT 25 YEARS transforming herself from Martha Kostyra, a working-class girl from New Jersey, into Martha Stewart, the perfect New Englander who can tell the rest of America how to lay a Thanksgiving table. But with her freedom and her business empire on the line, the nation's domestic diva is having to become someone else again: someone whom a jury will like.

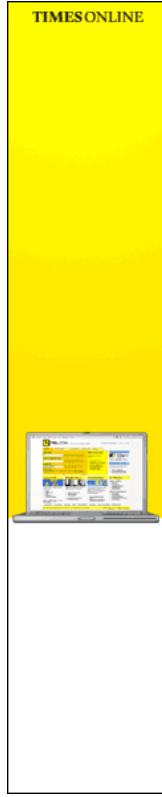
Over the past six months the woman responsible for the style choices of millions of Americans has undergone her own makeover, supervised by an army of highly paid professionals commissioned to protect her from the prospect of 30 years in prison for investment fraud and lying to investigators. Her trial, which began in Manhattan this week, will determine how successful they have been.

Taking orders from others, especially on image, is not something Martha Stewart has ever done willingly. But since the investigation began two years ago she has to face the fact that not everyone in America likes her — and the dislike of 12 men and women could send her to prison.

The prospect of life behind bars chills her. "I'm scared," she told the TV interviewer Barbara Walters. "The last place I would ever want to go is to prison." To avoid this fate, the billionaire Stewart, usually so parsimonious, has spared no expense and left little to chance.

Her chief defence lawyer, Robert Morvillo, has assembled a team of experts on everything from interpreting the mindset of juries to wearing the right clothes in court, and Stewart's fate has been placed in the hands of the best psychologists, behaviourists and psephologists that money can buy.

For an estimated \$400,000 a month she has been rehearsed by trial consultants, groomed by media consultants and made over by style consultants. In all, she will end up spending more than \$1 million on her elaborate image campaign — and that's before



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she pays her lawyers, who will charge at least that much again.

As her chief spokesman, George Sard, of the New York public relations company Citigate Sard Verbinen (hired by Ms Stewart for the duration of the trial), puts it: "We are simply trying to give Martha a more level playing field."

Unfettered by English laws of contempt, American lawyers have always gone to great lengths to ensure that their clients are prepared for the pressures of court. But even experienced legal observers have been impressed by the way Stewart's defence team have succeeded in minimising the downside of their client's celebrity, wealth and blonde iciness.

"Martha Stewart has a lot of negatives," says Judy Leon, senior vice president of the trial consultants DecisionQuest. "A lot of attention has been paid to how she treats her employees, whether she seems cold, whether she is generous. Her advisers have done well by making her more human."

There was much ground to be made up. Just after the investigation into her share dealings came to light, Stewart was making a salad on live television when she was interrupted by questions about the charges. She was typical Old Martha, brusque, grudging and cool, and dispatched the allegations as "ridiculousness". As she returned to beheading a cabbage, she snapped: "I want to focus on my salad." American talk show hosts had tremendous fun with that line.

Gradually Stewart realised that she wasn't quite as popular as she'd thought. When a *New Yorker* journalist visited her at her 200-year-old farmhouse in Westport, Connecticut, he admired some silver chopsticks. Stewart responded with chagrin. "You know, in China they say 'The thinner the chopsticks, the higher the social status'. Of course, I got the thinnest I could find." Then she added: "That's why people hate me."

Self-knowledge was one thing — but what to do about it? That has been George Sard's task. To try to make his client more likeable to New Yorkers who may have to judge her, he arranged for her to give two long television interviews to the soft-soap veterans Barbara Walters and Larry King. Stewart was rehearsed in how to introduce revelations about herself that would encourage people to identify with her.

"They chose well," says Laura Lopata, a New York "executive coach" who advises professionals, including those who must appear in court, on how to present themselves. "Larry King is never going to go for the jugular."

As Jeanine Pirro, the district attorney of Westchester, explains: "Today's world is not about facts, not about evidence. It's about whether or not the jury likes you. People thought of Martha as arrogant, controlling and cold, and she had everything to gain by going on with Barbara in her big sweater and her clogs."

Walters asked Stewart the question her million-

dollar makeover was designed to confront: "Do you feel that some people are delighted by your downfall because, as one reporter put it, 'Little Miss Perfect has fallen on her face'?" In response, Stewart showed Walters the modest house she grew up in in the working class town of Nutley, New Jersey, and revealed that life was often uncomfortable. "As one of six children," she explained, "I had to get up really early to use the bathroom."

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