



The Science of Style: Why Wardrobe Matters

“Image has become increasingly important, and it wasn’t when I started out...People who are hired have to be able to sing, but the singing is very much alongside the image”.

- Renee Fleming, opera star, quoted in Vogue magazine, 2008

First impressions last forever, and there are many elements that contribute to how one is perceived, but the very first aspect of impression-making is appearance, especially the manner in which one is dressed.

Some of us take an active - even obsessive - interest in clothing and accessories, and live to shop, yet there are plenty of others who consider clothing and other accoutrements to be little more than necessary evil.

However, both types may find themselves at a disadvantage in terms of hiring and promotion when the impressions made are not effective. Investing strategically in image - clothing, grooming, and accessorizing - can and will make all the difference as we navigate an ever-more visually oriented global culture and business environment. There are many factors - age, industry, region, season - to take into account when selecting the right look. So many, in fact, that this powerful opportunity for making an impact is fraught with peril.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Executives tend to make several typical mistakes, or lack attention to certain things, when it comes to wardrobe.

Sharon Kornstein, founder and president of ImageDesign LLC, points out that where men are concerned:

- The number one mistake men make is poor grooming. The issue may be inadequate shaving practices, wearing wrinkled or disheveled clothing, or hair that’s long overdue for a cut. Another frequent problem is failing to care for shoes. It is so much more efficient to purchase good quality shoes and take care of them through polishing, resoling, etc. rather than saving money up front to buy shoes that don’t look classy and probably aren’t comfortable or good quality, either.
- Avoid ill-fitting clothes. It is imperative to find a good tailor, and use them every time you purchase something or gain or lose weight. People really do notice clothing that doesn’t fit, and even expensive or designer clothing won’t look right if it doesn’t fit your body. If a jacket fits correctly in the shoulders it can be altered to fit any place else.
- Men also need to pay more attention to color. Almost everyone looks good in navy and charcoal gray; those are the basic colors for men’s professional wardrobes. Those with golden or olive tones in their skin also look great in earthy colors such as brown, olive and tan. If you don’t look well in earth tones, chances are a light gray suit or jacket will flatter you. But if you have a warm skin tone, then earth tones are one way to add variety to your wardrobe.

Susan Sommers, CEO of DressZing, notes that women tend to make the following errors:

- Attire is too casual or creative. Match your outfit to the occasion. No one has ever been criticized for looking too professional, but the opposite is certainly true. If you want to look successful, dress to a level

above what you expect your client, audience, or interviewer to wear. Even if you enjoy dramatic outfits, save anything extreme or exotic for your private life.

- Clothing doesn't fit well. Each piece should look like it was custom-made for your body. Remember, anything too big or too small will undermine your power. Different hip, waist, and bust measurements make most women a difficult off-the-rack fit. Find a good tailor and use them.
- Colors aren't strategic. Each hue has a meaning or emotion associated with it and the smart professional will wear those shades that not only flatter her coloring, but also send the right message. Red, for instance, projects energy, while black is powerful and yellow is upbeat.
- Excessive makeup or jewelry. Be careful not to overdo the cosmetics and accessories. Keep jewelry minimal, but make a statement. Wear a good watch and one bold piece, such as a chunky necklace or bracelet, rather than lots of fussy, jangly pieces. Same with makeup; a strong eye or lip color, but not both, and only if it flatters you. Keep nails to a moderate length in a neutral tone.

Professionals of both genders should also consider the following:

- Is my image current? Not all "classic" styles stay contemporary in terms of hemline, lapel, etc.
- Are my choices appropriate for my age and flattering to my coloring and body type?
- Am I appropriately dressed for the day's events - client visits, site tours, or management meetings.
- Are my clothes and shoes well-maintained as well as up-to-date?
- Do my accessories, from wallet to wristwatch to outerwear, reflect the image I want to portray?

Naturally, regional and cultural differences exist, and a banker in a London-based financial firm would likely take a very different style approach from an entertainment executive in Los Angeles, but those are broad divisions, with many more choices within.

Dress Down, Groom Up

Now that many companies have adopted business-casual dress codes, the margin for error has increased, especially when it comes to personal hygiene matters and grooming. There is a huge distinction between appearing informal and looking sloppy, but for many the line has blurred. The key principle to remember is this: When dressing down, groom up. What this means is that the more relaxed the outfit, the more polished the wearer must be. Relaxed clothing must be pressed, well-maintained, and presentable, and distinctly different from "weekend" or "vacation" clothing.

Impeccable grooming must also be employed, and even elevated, so as not to deflate the look: Unshaven faces, limp hair, or ragged fingernails look even worse in a dressed-down outfit. The same rules apply to tired backpacks or weathered totes. And good grooming doesn't end at the collar: Make sure that you are personally as freshly laundered - and deodorized - as your outfit.

Style is Serious Business

If you hate shopping, or feel you have no sense of personal style, by all means ask for help. Stylish friends or colleagues are one option, but keep in mind that all major department stores offer free personal service, with no obligation to buy, and there are many excellent consultants who can help you create a powerful professional look - sometimes starting right in your own closet.

Of course, performance and productivity matters; I would never suggest otherwise, and neither would colleagues in the field of image management. But if your goal is to excel, and advance your career to the next level...you need to look the part.

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