Dress Code:
What To Wear to Work is a Form of Non-Verbal Communication

1 JANUARY 20, 2012

It’s time to get up…shower…get ready for my day, and the first thing to figure out: what to wear to work. No big deal? Read on.

I remember working in a hospital where one of the Nursing Unit Clerks got sent home one day to change her clothes. Her unit manager was apparently fed up with this woman showing up looking like she was going to a club, rather than to work in a professional hospital setting. Leather mini-skirt, high-heels, men’s dress shirt open low, mane of hair wild and down and lots of makeup and perfume. She was gorgeous…and it was just a little “out there” in an environment where everyone else was wearing scrubs (those pajama-like comfy yet shapeless uniforms) and lab coats.

I remember showing up to a high-school reunion that had been billed as “casual dress”, to find several of the women in floor-length, sequined evening gowns. I started looking for the red carpet!

I have walked into office settings where people are dressed in business suits and conservative dresses, and the receptionist is in jeans and an off-the-shoulder sweatshirt thingie…(think Flashdance). I wondered how she got the job in the first place.

Underdressed or Overdressed…You Will Get Attention…Often of the Negative Kind.

What you wear is a form of communication. Period.

What to wear to work is a serious consideration, especially if you are trying to show others how competent/professional/worthy of “whatever” you are.

Like it or not, we are judged by the bits of cloth and leather and fluff that we drape our bodies with…all the time.

Just look at the “Best Dressed” and “Worst Dressed” pages of the fashion magazines. We judge a person on many levels based on what they put on that day.

A Little Experiment

Try this for yourself, and you will see. I have my students do this little experiment and then write about it. I would LOVE for you to do this too and let us know how it went…it’s fascinating. I ask them to dress one way (either dress down or dress up) and to go into some retail or business establishment, and to pay attention to how they are treated. Then the next day, (or sometimes it’s the same day), I have them dress the other way and go back, and make note of how they are treated this time. Often, the difference is stunning!

In general, people seem to be treated better, (more politely, with more friendliness and courtesy), the better dressed they are. Students who have gone into stores with no makeup, with fleece pants and tops on and carrying backpacks, have reported being followed around the store because the staff thought they might shoplift! Others have reported going into big swanky department stores all dressed up and getting lots of attention, and then going back to the very same store the
next day in casual or workout clothing, and getting little if any attention or help. Some were treated with disdain!

And all because of what you wear.

So...What to Do?

Firstly, **consider where it is you are going, and what kind of image you want to project.** Whether you agree with it, or like it, or think it’s fair or not...you will be judged and it will happen **in the first 7 seconds.** (This is why the whole thing about first impressions is so powerful...it’s true!)

If you are going to the gym, then it would be appropriate to wear workout clothes, of course. If you wear your bling and your full-on makeup...you may get funny looks, because most people are there to actually work-out and get sweaty.

But if you are going to the office or to a meeting, work-out clothes may not be the best choice. (Vancouver was recently billed as one of the **worst dressed cities** because people tend to wear yoga pants and shorts and workout gear **EVERYWHERE,** and I think it sometimes may be a lifestyle statement about being healthy and chic and able to afford to either go to yoga in the middle of the day, or at all. I’m just surmising...and am not surprised in the least.) I remember being in Montreal and my great Aunt Flo telling me I was not dressed appropriately to go shopping at the local mall. (I was in jeans and a top, which is appropriate where I live). I had to get all spiffed up just to go spend money, and I do recall noticing how professional even the shoppers looked.

**Take care when traveling of dress code expectations...this is a really good question to ask your travel agent before going.**

At the Office:

**At the office...there are certain things that just aren’t a good idea if you want to communicate competence and professionalism.** These include:

- showing off too much leg or cleavage...whether you are female or male. (The hairy chest with gold chains is NOT sexy...in fact, it’s a little sleazy, in a “My Cousin Vinny” kinda way.)
- Showing off your feet, back or underwear is also not professional. If you wear it to the beach or to a dance, you can’t wear it to work.
- heavy aftershave or perfume can communicate lack of confidence, believe it or not. (It can also induce allergic reactions and so many workplaces have instituted scent-free policies.) A light, subtle scent is far more sophisticated and will be less likely to offend anyone.
- leave the spandex at home. Or change into it after your shift if you must, but workout wear should stay at the grocery store or the gym. Leave the jeans at home too...they rarely look professional.
- fads or funky trends...unless your office is one that supports that.
- wrinkled, dirty, torn or frayed clothing communicates that you don’t care, which may be truthful, but won’t help further your aura of competence. Clothing needs to be clean and in good repair.
- be careful of messages on clothing. Words, logos, brand-names and images that might not fit with the ethos of the company you work for, may not be helpful. Save those for days off.

What to Wear to Work...
If your office is “Business Casual”, which is common, then dress pants, dockers (cotton or synthetic materials), dress shirts, casual tops, sweaters, blouses, jackets and ties would work. Dresses and skirts that come below the knee and that don’t ride up when you sit down are appropriate. Spaghetti straps and tops that show your belly are not.

**Shoes** should be closed-toed. Flip-flops, sandals and dressy-spiked heels are not…and may not comply with company insurance regulations. Athletic shoes are also not usually appropriate unless they are black or non-flashy.

**Hats** are not usually appropriate for the office. (Religious and cultural head-wear would be the exception to this).

If you are working in an office that is medically-related, uniforms are often required. There are thousands of different styles and variations of uniforms, and the only caution I would give there is that the pattern be appropriate for the office you are working in. A children’s dental office would be the perfect place for the cutesy cartoon-printed scrubs that are available, but those same scrubs may not be appropriate in other medical settings.

### Expense:

It is completely possible to dress well for work without breaking the bank. I am a firm believer in **consignment store and thrift store shopping**, both from an environmental standpoint, and from an expense perspective. I have found absolutely beautiful pieces of dress clothing for work at a fraction of the cost of purchasing these new, and part of the fun for me is “the thrill of the chase”!

Many stores have fabulous end-of-season sales, and business dress clothing is often classic and doesn’t go out of style quickly, so can be acquired at the end of one season in preparation for the next.

### Hair, Make-up and Jewellery:

With the last two, **less is more** is a good rule of thumb. Save the false eyelashes and heavy hand in the cosmetic department for clubbing and the crown jewels for your night-life. These will detract from your credibility.

Tasteful makeup application is best. If you aren’t sure how, many department stores offer free lessons.

A few choice pieces of jewellery communicate that you have good taste, but are not trying to show off.

Your hairstyle and what you do with it depends on what kind of office you work in. **If you work in healthcare**, the preferred option is to keep short hair neat and tidy, and keep long hair up or back.

Piercings, tattoos and hair-color will also communicate a message to others. Many businesses have policies about these things as well, so finding out about these before you dye your hair pink might be helpful!

### A Final Note:

It’s too bad, really, that we do this to each other. We spend time **worrying more about what a person has on their bodies** than we do about what comes out of their mouths or what actions they take. I am, of course, generalizing. There are many people who work hard at **NOT** doing that, and I try to be one of them…but it’s hard to do consistently. We tend to form opinions when we see each other, and we do so quickly. Until we get to know the other person, we believe our own thoughts…and this can be truly unfair.

In conclusion, if you want to appear confident, appear to be good at your job and seem professional, take care with what you wear to work…**it DOES make a difference.**