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PROFESSIONAL WARDROBE TIPS FROM THE EXPERTS

Building a high-performing professional wardrobe has always been important to professional success, but today it is, without a doubt, more critical than ever. A competitive business climate means you have to stand out. Many companies that went “business casual” are haywire; people are showing up dressed for nightlife or soccer games, not for the office—and in doing so they are losing their professional edge. We hear so many complaints about the way people dress for work we could write a book. Just as you are what you eat, in the business world, you are what you wear.

Victoria Seitz, image consultant and author of *Your Executive Image*, says that in job interviews about 75 percent of the decision to hire is based on the applicant’s appearance. She also points out that within the first thirty seconds of an encounter, eleven assumptions, including credibility, are made about the person being presented. Though it may seem unfair, evidence like this demonstrates that your image alone has the potential to project your level of professionalism that can make or break your credibility. “In social or business settings, clothing acts as a communicator of ourselves, our company, and our position.” Clothing alone can communicate respect, authority, position, and credibility—and the way in which we use it affects the way others respond to us.

If you want to send out the right signals, what should you do? This is one of those challenges that is completely within your control. Since you are the one who makes those purchases, you can practice what Seitz calls “impression management.” Simply put, you have the ability to dress so that the impressions others form about you are the impressions you want them to form. This is not to say that there is no room for expressing your individuality, or that you have to buy expensive clothing—you just must be able to communicate it in a way that also demonstrates your professional creativity, leadership potential, and confidence in yourself and your abilities.

So where do you begin? Our favorite corporate image consultant, Mary Lou Andre suggests, “Your appearance at work should match your ambitions.” In her new book **Dressing Well: An Organized Approach to Style**, to be published later this year, Andre recommends visualizing the image you want to have once you’ve achieved your career goals. Do you look credible? Could you walk in the door tomorrow, take on that promotion, and look the part? If not, you must

build your current wardrobe. Andre adds, "Remember, dress for the job you want, not the one you have."

To begin this process of revamping your wardrobe, start noticing people you admire in your industry your workplace, and your position. Become keenly aware of the nuances of respected professionals in your field and you will usually pinpoint the right image. If you work in a more creative field, the looser, more relaxed style of "business casual" is acceptable. If you are in a corporate position or sales where you regularly meet with clients, opt for a formal, conservative look. The bottom line is, as Andre states, "If you want the job, you have to look the part. If you want the promotion, you have to look promotable. If you want respect, you have to dress at or above your industry standards."

Once you have noticed what people you respect are wearing, start adjusting your own wardrobe, building slowly. The importance of sending the correct messages cannot be stressed enough, because as Andre says, "Your professional image is the most important factor in showing management where you want to go within the organization." Andre adds, "It also can help you gain the respect of colleagues and establish instant trust and credibility with clients who are making critical decisions about your company and its products and services."

Your professional wardrobe should suggest your preparedness for different situations, the importance you place on your job, and the respect you have for yourself and others. Clothing that is low-quality or inappropriate demonstrates carelessness for your appearance and a lack of respect for the impact you have on your company, which leads people to question how much value you really place on your job. Keep your clothing updated, making sure you have classic pieces, comfortable fits, and year-round fabrics to get the most mileage and confidence out of your closet.

To make sure that your image communicates a high level of professionalism, Andre suggests making three words your mantra when choosing your clothing or while shopping:

1. **Appropriateness.** Make sure your clothing consistently and appropriately complements your work environment.
2. **Boundaries.** Choose clothing that provides proper coverage at the neckline and hemline, and draws attention to your face.
3. **Respect.** Demonstrate respect for yourself and others by considering how others view your clothing choices.

You do not need to have the best fashion sense, biggest closet, or deepest pockets to create a credible professional image. You do not need to look like a factory-manufactured professional, either. Remember that your image is not just about your clothing, but is a reflection of your total persona. Your individuality communicates self-confidence, creativity, and leadership. The key is to project your uniqueness while maintaining the appropriateness for your profession, and you will build the credibility you need to succeed.

To get more "dressing well" tips from Mary Lou Andre, visit Organization By Design's website at www.dressingwell.com