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LOOKING YOUR PROFESSIONAL BEST

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LOOKING YOUR PROFESSIONAL BEST

Beverly Rhoades*

Are you dressing for success or failure? What do your clothes say about you? Clothing may pave the road to career success or put stumbling blocks in your path. Which direction is your clothing taking you? To be successful, women must recognize the importance of clothing in getting and keeping a job and winning promotions in a professional career.

CLOTHING COMMUNICATES

Our clothing communicates something about us by visually projecting our talents, moods, personality, disposition and goals. Clothing is vitally important to professionals because it is the greatest single influence on the impressions we create. We never have a second chance to make a first impression. We may have a chance later to change the impression we created if we have additional encounters, but we usually can't take that risk.

We cannot dress neutrally. Whatever we wear makes a statement. It may say, "I feel good about myself. I am confident I can handle this job." Or it may reveal, "I am not prepared to handle this job. I am unsure of myself."

When used correctly, clothing can improve appearance and help you advance in your profession. If your job involves working with people, your dress can affect them either positively or negatively. Understand the clothing expectations of your associates and dress for the situation. Look professional, but don't dress far above or below those you work with.

*Extension consumer information specialist, The Texas A&M University System.

Appropriate

Inappropriate

Figure 1. Your clothing communicates your professional image. Clothing which is inappropriate for the office projects the wrong image at work.

Clothing establishes rank, role or position. You may wear a uniform which indicates the job you do, an obvious sign of rank or role which helps others know how to respond. But dress need not be a uniform to indicate rank or level. Although the signs may be subtle, dress can reveal your level of authority. The skirted suit may be the most effective dress in establishing credibility and authority. The jacket probably has the greatest influence in communicating authority.

When authority is important for your job, establish your credentials first with conservative, authoritative dress, then begin to vary color, lines and fabrics in your wardrobe since lack of variety can become boring to you and those around you. Also, women in authority may want to avoid looking too feminine, but neither should they look too masculine. Feminine touches can be added subtly.

Learn to use fashion trends effectively. Dressing in the latest fads may hinder or advance professional progress in some careers, but dressing completely out of style can also hamper chances for job advancement. Be aware of fashion, but choose classic styles for work. Save the extreme looks for evenings or weekends.



Figure 2. A skirted suit provides versatile, professional career apparel. Accessories help create different looks using the same basic suit.

Some businesses consider clothing so important in creating a favorable image, they have dress codes. They may be written or "unwritten" and follow lenient or strict guidelines. Codes may require certain dress, such as suits, or restrict certain items, such as pants. If there are no codes where you work, the following guidelines may help:

- Be clean and neat. Clothes should be well pressed for a crisp, fresh look.
- Wear comfortable, well fitting clothes.
- Avoid revealing necklines, bare-backed bodices and bare midriffs.
- Avoid garments and undergarments that are too tight or extremely large.
- Avoid glittery or noisy jewelry.
- Avoid dressy, flashy fabrics and extreme styles.
- Avoid casual items such as faded or patched blue jeans and flongs.
- When in doubt, simple is best.

While clothing is a powerful communicator, clothing alone cannot assure job success or make you something you are not. Job performance determines success or failure. Clothing simply accentuates the positive or negative. Notice what others around you at work are wearing. To get ahead, pattern your dress after the most successful. Dress for the job you want, not for the job you have (unless, of course, the two are the same).

DRESSING FOR THE INTERVIEW

Whether you are trying to get a new job, a different job or a promotion, your clothing should project confidence. Employers want to hire people who will present a good image. If all other things are equal, an employer will choose the person dressed appropriately and neatly. If you care about yourself and your appearance, the employer will assume you care more about your job.

When selecting attire for an interview, suit your clothing to the kind of job and people you will come in contact with. Someone interviewing to be a lab technician may dress differently than a person interviewing to be a bank vice president. Dress as though you already have the job, but be careful not to appear overdressed.

When possible, investigate the company or business you interview with to determine their clothing expectations. If you are unfamiliar with the business, visit in advance and notice how people dress. Hiring and promotion decisions, especially for top level positions, are often made by older, conservative executives who use the traditional business suit as a guide to professional appearance; therefore, a tailored look may increase your chances for being hired.

Garments appropriate for an interview include simple, tailored styles and accessories; comfortable clothes in restful colors; and clean clothes that fit well and are well pressed with a crisp, fresh look. For the business or professional woman, a tailored, conservative skirted suit is recommended. Best colors include blue, gray and beige; however, you should choose colors which flatter you and boost your morale.

Avoid flashy fabrics, extreme styles, glittery or noisy jewelry, revealing necklines or bodices, hemlines inches above the knee and clothes that are too dressy, too tight or too big.

During the interview, body language is important. Smile, be confident and relaxed. Don't fiddle with your clothes or your hair. Sit attractively; don't slouch. Speak clearly and look confidently at the interviewer.



Figure 3. Body language is important during the interview. Smiling and good eye contact project confidence.



Sitting attractively is important during the interview.

GROOMING FOR JOB SUCCESS

When you look professional, you are more likely to feel confident. This increases your credibility since people assume you are capable because you care about your appearance.

Grooming for work may not differ from your usual grooming habits. The most important consideration is neatness, but also consider where you work and the kind of job you have. You can easily project a professional image by following basic rules of good grooming and concentrating on conservative rather than extreme makeup and hair styles.

Cosmetics

Cosmetics are an important aspect of grooming. Makeup can help or hinder job success. Makeup should look natural and reflect current cosmetic trends. While you need not adopt extreme looks, using yesterday's makeup techniques can have the same negative impact as out-of-date clothing. Watch magazines for current trends or consult a makeup artist for suggestions on the best techniques for you.

A few touches of the right makeup can enhance your features and contribute to your self-confidence. Use a light touch to play up your best features and minimize others. Select a foundation that is near the color of your natural skin tone. You may want to choose tones which help correct personal skin coloring that is too red or too yellow, but be sure an obvious makeup line is not evident at the chin. Lighter colors can highlight areas and help conceal wrinkle lines, shallow valleys, or dark circles under the eyes.

Use blush or rouge sparingly — just enough to highlight your own natural coloring and give your face a healthy glow. Coordinate cheek, eye and lip color with your clothes.

Soft eyeshadows enhance the eyes, but vivid shadows can be overpowering. Mascara helps open the eyes and gives them more expression, but “caked on” or heavy applications can be distracting. Gently arch brows for a neat, tailored look — not too thick or too thin.

Lipstick is almost a must, but avoid extremely bright colors. A lip pencil helps define the shape of lips, correct small imperfections and prevent lipstick from “feathering” into tiny wrinkles or creases around the lips. Add lip color with a brush for better shaping and color control.

Healthy skin is the most important aspect of cosmetics. Since skin is like a canvas for a painting, it should be as clean and flawless as possible before makeup is applied. No amount of makeup will give you a good complexion, but a good, daily skin care routine will.



Figure 4. Follow the basic rules of grooming to create a professional image.

Hair

Hair-like makeup, can help you feel great, look terrific and have more confidence. It can also do just the opposite so hair care and styling is extremely important. Hair says a lot about you — how organized you are, how much you care about making a good impression and your awareness of current styles.

As an employed woman, you probably won't have much time to spend on your hair, so a professional look with minimum time and effort is essential. Start with a good, professional cut that takes advantage of your hair's natural tendencies. Choose a style that will not require constant attention during the day and avoid excessive curls and exotic looks, unless you are in the fashion industry.

If your hair is gray and it bothers you, consider using a hair color. Some experts contend that gray hair takes authority away from women; others disagree. Do what is best for you. A little color can give you a lift, but drastic color changes can look unnatural and unbecoming.

Choose a style that makes the most of your features and face shape. A style that creates an oval effect around your face is generally considered the most attractive. Use hair to help minimize prominent features or fill in receding areas.

Whatever your hairstyle, cleanliness is important. Be sure your schedule allows time for frequent shampooing. And keep your hair in good condition. Use conditioners as often as needed to keep your hair shiny and manageable. A deep penetrating conditioner once or twice a month (or more) can help to keep your hair in excellent shape.

Hands

Keep hands well groomed and file nails into a smooth oval shape. Avoid extremely long nails which can look "witchlike," hamper job performance and distract from appearance.

Nails should always be clean and well manicured. Nail polish may be appropriate in some cases and not in others. If you wear nail polish, coordinate the color with your clothes. When polish begins to chip, apply another coat or re-do nails. Never allow your nails to be partly covered with polish.

Fragrance

If you wear a fragrance, choose a delicate perfume or cologne. Never let a fragrance overpower you. And never use a fragrance as a cover-up for lack of cleanliness. Apply fragrance to a clean body and use an antiperspirant or deodorant to control perspiration odor.

PLANNING A CAREER WARDROBE

A functional wardrobe is especially important for the employed woman. Developing an effective wardrobe can be expensive, but maintaining one should not be. A wardrobe is an investment and, like other investments, an initial expenditure is necessary in order to get a return.

If your current wardrobe is inadequate for the job you want, gradually add to what you have. Don't spend a lot of money at one time for new clothes when on a limited budget. Carefully select new items to project the image you want. For the home sewer, making the career wardrobe can save money. Some pattern companies have catalog sections aimed at the career woman to help make wardrobe selections.

Plan your wardrobe to project an image that says you are organized, neat, professional, flexible and aware of the world around you. A career wardrobe should be appropriate for the office and yet take you out to dinner, to a party, or into casual weekends.

Your wardrobe should fit well, be good quality, versatile, comfortable, classic and easy-care. For the woman who travels, clothes should be packable. Also, a wardrobe should reflect your age. Attempts to camouflage are generally unsuccessful. Allow your dress to show the charm and wisdom of your years.

Analyze Current Wardrobe

Before planning a wardrobe, first analyze what you have. Take *everything* out of your closet, including items on shelves or hooks. Next, separate the wearables from the unwearables. To do this, study each garment as you begin putting clothes back in the closet. If you answer "yes" to each of the following questions, the garment is a wearable. If it fails the test, the garment is an unwearable.

- Does it fit?
- Is the color, style and texture becoming to you?
- Is the style current?
- Is the garment clean and free from stain, missing buttons, tears and other flaws?
- Do you like the garment and feel good wearing it?

Return the wearables to your closet. Further study the unwearables. Can they be made into wearables with a little attention? Some garments may need only cleaning or minor repairs. Others may need adjustments for fit or style, such as raising or lowering a hem line. Some could be recut into a new garment for yourself or someone else. Others may be hopeless.

Separate the unwearables into the following categories (depending on your sewing ability and willingness to repair and recycle):

- to be cleaned
- to repair
- to recycle
- to give to charity, friends or relatives, or to resell
- to discard or turn into rags

Do not return the unwearables to your closet until you have made necessary changes to make them wearable. If you give garments to charity, be sure to get a receipt for the total value of the clothes. This gift is tax deductible.

Once your closet is filled only with wardrobe assets, organize garments by categories such as skirts, jackets and blouses. Separate suits or coordinates generally worn together. Many of these items will team up with other separates to form new combinations. Consider making a file of index cards with mixing and matching possibilities, including accessories, for later reference.

Now, stand back and look at your clothes. What are the major colors? Are these colors your favorites? Do these colors flatter you? If not, consider color changes as you add to your wardrobe.

Compare the wardrobe to your lifestyle needs. Do you have adequate clothing for the activities you participate in? Do you have too many garments for some activities? Identify the categories needing attention. For example, if your casual clothes take up a greater percentage of your closet than your activities require, yet your career apparel is inadequate for the time you spend at work, then you need to add clothes to your career section. Or, if possible, convert some casual clothes to career apparel with minor changes.



Figure 5. Compare your current wardrobe to your lifestyle needs.

Analysis:

1. Need more career clothes. Determine specific garments on chart.
2. Need more sports clothes. Determine specific garments on chart.
3. Have too many clothes for leisure and after five. Do not make or buy more clothes for these purposes for a while. Convert some for other purposes if possible.

Career Wardrobe Plan

Item	Style	Color	Fabric
Jackets			
Skirts			
Pants			
Sweaters			
Blouses			
Vests			
Dresses			
Coats			
Accessories			

Figure 6. Garments and accessories needed to create a more functional wardrobe.

Plan Additions Needed

Once you have clearly determined your clothing needs, you are ready to shop. A list helps you avoid impulse spending and helps you stay within your clothing budget. If you need to match a garment, take it or a swatch card with you. Or take items out on approval so you can try on the garments together at home and check for compatibility.

Choose clothing that looks good on you. You are your own best critic. When you know a garment does not fit well or the style is wrong for you, don't be persuaded by a sales clerk or friend to buy the garment. Check garment fit from all angles in a full length mirror.

Concentrate on separates and a few basic colors. Add colors and styles from the current season which coordinate with clothes you have. Separates are versatile and may fit better if you are different sizes in the bust and hips.

Jackets are excellent wardrobe additions for the executive woman because they help establish authority. Coordinate jackets with skirts, pants and dresses.



Figure 1. Jackets coordinate with skirts, pants and dresses to help establish authority and expand wardrobe.

Choose classic styles. Extreme styles or fads are short-lived and quickly date your wardrobe. Classic styles can be worn for years and easily dressed up or down with simple accessory changes. When cost is a factor, choose better quality in classic styles. Quality is not so important in fads and may allow you to buy the newest fashion at low cost. Or update your wardrobe with inexpensive accessories.

Basic colors for wardrobes can be almost any color, not just the ones traditionally thought of as neutral, such as black, brown, gray or white. You can easily use navy, beige, camel, cream, ivory, khaki, tan, taupe or wheat. Other popular colors include maroon, burgundy or plum, rust or cinnamon and various shades of blue. Choose colors you like and look attractive in.

Fabrics which create a professional appearance include tweeds, linens, silks, (and fabrics which look like silk and linen), corduroys, gabardines and non-clinging knits. Avoid extremely delicate fabrics or shiny, flashy ones.

Accessories add versatility to the wardrobe. Shoes or boots should be comfortable and in basic colors, unless you want to draw attention to your feet. Neutral colored sheer hose are always appropriate. Opaque or textured hose in fashion colors can be appropriate, depending on the kind of job you have.

Coordinate handbags with the color and mood of the garments worn. If you use a briefcase, a small bag can be carried inside or totally eliminated. Shoulder bags are handy because they leave the hands free to carry other things although clutches are also appropriate. Avoid extremely large bags which resemble suitcases.

Shoes and bags need not match, but both should coordinate with your garments and with each other.

Scarves, when in fashion, provide variety, color and interest to the wardrobe. Belts are a fashion fad, both wide and narrow versions, including chains, leather, sashes, macramé and ropes.

Simple gold and silver jewelry combines well with almost any garment. Colorful beads and bangles are appropriate accents if they are not too gaudy.

Hats are fine for those who enjoy wearing them. They should be fairly small and simple and removed while at work.

CREATE THE LOOK YOU LIKE

The message you convey to others should be business-like, but should also be a message you are comfortable with. If you are pleased with yourself and your career image, you are more likely to please others. As you dress for the day, think about your schedule — Who will you see? What will you be doing? — then decide on the image you want to project. Before you go to work each day, check from head to toe in a full length mirror. Try to see yourself as others will see you.

Wardrobe planning and organization can be time consuming, but it pays off. A few hours spent each season (fall/winter and spring/summer) analyzing your wardrobe and planning needed additions will enable you to project a positive, professional image.

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