

Dressing for success

By Ann-Maree Moodie | smh.com.au | 08 May 2008



He was 28 years old, good-looking, smart and had a good job. But his work attire consisted of T-shirts, shorts and thongs, which might have been the perfect choice of footwear had he wanted to show off his hairy toes. And he wondered why he wasn't getting promoted.

"For two years he'd been asking in vain for a pay rise," says image consultant Clare Maxfield of Corporate Confidence in Melbourne. "Even though it was a very casual workplace and he was admired for his work, his bosses saw him as the joker of the office because of the way he dressed. His wardrobe was a hindrance to his career."

So he ironed a shirt, bought a new suit, polished his shoes and went to a job interview. He got the job and a promotion into management with the pay rise his expertise and experience demanded.

"While your skills are important, people have to believe you can do the role," Maxfield says. "If you look the part, people will stop and listen to determine if you sound the part."

In the past few years faster, more powerful and more mobile technology has transformed the way we do our jobs, allowing us to work anywhere, any time. Many people make the mistake of thinking that this increased flexibility translates into a more casual style of dress.

Every twentysomething who wants that first promotion into management needs to audit their image before seeking a pay rise or attending a job interview.

The image you project in the months leading to your bid for management will help change the way you're perceived by those influential to the decision.

One 26-year-old female client of Maxfield's was still wearing the clothes she'd bought when she was at university.

"Her wardrobe consisted of bits and pieces," Maxfield says. "The clothes didn't co-ordinate well and nothing said 'professional'."

Two new suits and three business shirts immediately changed that image.

"When you're promoted into a management role for the first time in your mid- to late 20s or early 30s, you have to dress the part," Maxfield says. "People want to be able to look up to a leader especially because you'll have to 'boss' them and maybe have a tough conversation about their performance."

The first rule in making over your work wardrobe is to check the dress codes of your industry. Professional services such as accounting, finance and law, for example, still expect employees to dress conservatively.

If you're changing industries, the way the job interviewer is dressed is a good indicator of what is expected. Your wardrobe should reflect the brand of your employer as well as your unique personality.

"If it is a corporate environment, I would suggest purchasing a suit and two shirts, for a business casual environment I would suggest dress trousers, casual jacket and shirt," says Susan Garrett, a marketing manager for Optus. "All items can be mixed and matched with your current wardrobe and will assist you in portraying a confident personal image."

Other items worth buying are a well-made briefcase and a good pen. You should expect to pay more for your clothes and should always buy the best you can afford.

"I started a new job recently and I wanted to feel confident and portray the right personal image," Garrett says. "The main thing I concentrated on was clothes. I didn't know the best colours and styles of clothes to wear, and as a result didn't feel confident at work."

"In a corporate environment it is very important to be confident and clothes play a vital part. The majority of my working day is attending business meetings and first impressions are key. I now have clothes that portray a confident and professional business woman."

Janette Saab, the managing director of Sydney's Image Consultants, says the rate of investment for your work wardrobe can be calculated by multiplying the garment's cost by the number of times it's worn.

"In order to have a good and respectable image it's vital that professionals invest

in the way they dress," Saab says.

"Investing in high-quality garments and accessories that will last for years is a much better idea than buying cheap items that will only last a few months.

"As a guide, spend one month's salary a year on your professional wardrobe. Your business wardrobe is your visual resume and is as important to your career as your education and experience."

Helen Robinett of Melbourne's Image Quest says self-sabotaging your career with the clothes you wear is common. "If you wear dated clothes, you're sending a message that you're old-fashioned and resistant to change," she says. "Dressing too young or too old for your age, and wearing the wrong size [usually too small] are common mistakes."

Another way to sabotage your image is to put too much trust in the word of sales assistants, who are paid to sell as many items as possible regardless of whether they look good on you.

"Finally, don't look fabulously well-groomed and dressed one day and then poorly presented the next," Robinett says. "You're always being watched at work and inconsistency sends the message - even if it's not true - that you're inconsistent at work as well."

Skirting the issue

It's not just clothes that make a difference - grooming is important and maintenance of your hair, nails and teeth should be addressed regularly.

Good hygiene shouldn't need to be mentioned but, sadly, some people need reminding. Women have particular issues to consider.

"I find that businesswomen don't [adequately] evaluate their business environment," says Susan Garrett from Optus.

"The key mistakes made by women are not dressing for your age and shape, or style and business environment.

"Unfortunately the result is not portraying [confidence]; it is one that confuses the client, colleagues and therefore people leave a business meeting talking about the appearance of women as opposed to the outcome of the meeting."

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