

Dressing for success

(Taken from the UCPA publication *Career Planning*)

Can help us if, as the experts state, we are what we wear! Oh sure, as notable an authority as Shakespear wrote "... apparel doth proclaim the man" (and the woman) and just to add to the list, remember these?

- How you look is how you feel
- Clothes make the man
- Your first impression is your best impression

To be downright blunt about it, there is even the still held belief that if you want to be successful (whatever that means!!) then you must dress for it. You may rightly ask who is responsible for determining just what is and what isn't success. Does the successful formula come in two quite different forms, one being men and the other women? What about Boy George when considering success and dress? If success means being well known, having millions of admirers of varying age and sex, making gobs of money and then being a man dressing like a woman, is that dressing for success?!!

Is all this success and dress talk really a sham? If you must "dress for the occasion" and "look the part" doesn't that just smack of veneer and pretense? Does, in fact, dress really make the man? Consider for a moment the loin cloth *only* of the first settlers on Canadian soil, let along the Aboriginies of Australia. Is dress just a cover-up or is there more than that to it? Are these people any less or more successful considering their dress is essentially a quite basic body cover.

When setting out to do research for writing this article one of the source areas was recruitment advertising placed by many organizations and companies hoping to attract qualified candidates for myriad of positions. In many of these advertisements there was the definite, or at least tacit criterion for possessing a smart, well groomed appearance.

Books, articles, seminars and just plain good conversation that have a focus on the importance of appearance seem to conclude that it plays an important role in shaping a career. Experts tell us that what we are is what we wear! If we reflect for just a moment we may rightly conclude that we've continued to trudge along not only being exactly sloppy but not really being *sharp* either. Putting it another way, it is as if we consciously decided we wanted to remain in the lower rungs of the economic ladder.

It's been said many times that first impressions stay with us a

very long time. Consider the adage that you never get a chance to make a second good first impression! Don't you agree that we've all met people we have liked or disliked instantly? If we are truly honest we will admit that we judge others in a matter of seconds when we first meet them. It's a very difficult task to eliminate a first impression.

Just before moving away from the Boy George example of the "rightness" or "wrongness" of dressing for success we might want to consider the statement made by British pop star Sade that "... I'm quite antifashion." Sade went from bohemian poverty to pop stardom. "But success means we can carry on without compromise, make another record and see what that leaves us."

Sade has been closely associated with the fashion world. She studied to be a men's fashion designer before turning to a path leading to her popular career. Listen to what she says about fashion: "Fashion doesn't have anything to do with the music per se. I mean, I could wear crimped bell bottoms and platform shoes in the studio and my voice would sound just as good. I like looking my best, because it makes me feel better, and I like people who look sharp. I'm quite anti-fashion in a sense. I hate when everyone starts wearing the same clothes simply because that's what's supposed to be in this year ... I like to get up in the morning and dress in a way that makes me feel confident ..."

Do you suppose that Sade was also a classic scholar? Remember that Socratic dictum, "to thine own self be true!" Sade said it — I like to get up in the morning and dress in a way that makes me feel confident! Today we read and hear the endless litany of "how to" dress directives, be it for success, the interview, the graduation ball, the formal dinner party, dining out in the chic places or just a quiet informal summer evening barbecue in the back yard. Seems there is a definite, or at least implied dress code for each of these occasions or, if you will, happenings.

O.K.! Let's stop for a moment and try to put this dress and success thing into perspective. The particular focus at this moment is on the campus interview and all the many pieces that must come together to maximize the efforts necessary to bring about a successful conclusion (meaning a job offer!). If successful, it means due consideration to developing a career. The vast array of literature and research provided by a new wave of dress-for-success experts

concludes that appearance is just about *everything* in business, your social life, your marriage or in any activity. Not only are these new experts determined to make us all appearance-alert (as they phrase it) but they back up their arguments with facts, figures and documented material which are hard to ignore.

The basic message for those in business is:

If you're careless about how you look you're careless period.

Careless in this context translates into being "non professional." Why? Because a pro is not careless; a pro is careful and a pro is always sharp about details. Conversely, a pro will lose credibility if he wears checkered pants to a serious business conference, or if he turns up at a client's office with unshined shoes or stains on his tie.

Another dress-for-success message is that even if your work in a relaxed atmosphere make sure your blue jeans are immaculate. The premise is that customers will accept the fact different people work in different locals — doctors for example, wear smocks and newspaper reporters wear sports jackets. But the same clients want

assurance that the service of these people will be of top quality — and a neat clean appearance is the first bench mark they apply.

John T. Molloy, author of "Dress for Success" (for men) and "The Women's Dress for Success" book, spent nine years research the impact of clothing — and other elements of appearance — in industrial settings.

His studies indicated that if errors are to be made, they are best made on the conservative side — dressing down rather than up. For example, a blue jacket with grey slacks is still universally accepted attire for men whereas women can't go wrong if they wear a high contrast tailored but-not-severe blouse, mid-heel pumps and interesting accessories. (Oddly enough, a woman's image in business would be enhanced considerably, the study showed, if she carries an attache case as part of her job.)

Other studies in this area have shown:

- That soft green or beige is the recommended colour (they're soothing) to wear on a job interview.
- The loud red or blues or loud anything gets a thumb's down.

● When executive dress conservatively, employees feel more secure in their positions.

● The average businessman should have three suits in the mid-price range and he should buy them in the same general colour family (blues and greys or browns and beiges) so he can wear one set of shoes, belts, ties, etc.

● Most important, these clothes should be looked after — and updated — if you are to carry through with the dress for success theme.

● For women, the same general rules apply, only more so on the conservative side, since women are still struggling for full recognition in many professional fields.

John Molloy says "the biggest mistake women make is in dressing as if they were doing something other than working. Denim is an example. They'll wear it and wonder why they aren't taken seriously. Even on TV, sportswear doesn't work."


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