

Casual Day Extremes: Are Your Dressing for Success

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In the past, many men showed up for work in a dark suit, white shirt and conservative tie? Women wore prime, conservatively colored dresses or suits that topped off at the knee level? Gradually over the years, organizations and business people have drifted from these strict dress standards to what many professionals and customers now see as sloppiness in the workplace. Behind this evolution, among other things, was the concept of providing a more relaxed workplace to counter the impact of downsizings, doing more with less, reduced promotions and raises and lost benefits. It was a way of giving something to employees without having to pay for it while reducing the financial burden of their having to pay for and maintain expensive business clothing. What started as casual Fridays have become casual everyday.

Fast forward up to 2005.... we now see professionals coming to work in the “play clothes” which include jeans with holes in them (because they are stylish), flip flops, bare midriffs exposing tattoos and body jewelry, colorless shirts and clothing with any number of potentially offensive words, phrases and images on them. Even people at executive levels are participating in the casual revolution. Several months ago, while attending the announcement of Times Warner/AOL, CEO Gerald Levin appeared tie-less. This would have been an unthinkable faux pas decades ago, few people blinked when one of the most powerful Fortune 500 executives showed up sans tie. How many times have you seen one of the U.S. Presidents in a photo or at an event in causal clothes since the late 1980s? This would have been unthinkable for previous presidents or diplomats.

A survey by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) in 2000 found that 87 percent of companies polled reported either a one-day-a-week or every day casual wear policy. In another survey of 235 people who were asked what was the most casual attire permitted by their employer, they responded:

1. Very casual (e.g. t-shirts and jeans) = 29%
2. Business casual = 50%
3. Typical business attire = 20%

Is this a good or bad trend? That depends on who you ask. Ask the older workers who have been in the business world for decades and they are often appalled at the extremes. Ask younger X and Y generation employees and you might get a “what’s the problem?” response.

The bottom line is that, depending on the business environment, a certain level of decorum is appropriate in order to send a message of professionalism, competence, and respect to customers and others who visit an organization. Many people that I have discussed this issue with have told me that they simply do not patronize establishments and businesses where employees present a less than professional appearance. Their logic is that if they dress in a slovenly manner, how do they perform their job? What is

the quality of their output? This is especially true in situations where employees are handling food or other consumables.

Many publications and organizations make a living out of how to dress effectively in the workplace. Longtime fashion gurus such as John Malloy have been offering advice on professional dos and don'ts related to clothing for years. A recent book by Sherry Maysonave titled *Casual Power: How to Power Up Your Nonverbal Communication and Dress Down for Success* (available at www.presentationresources.net) provides many useful thoughts and suggestions on presenting yourself in a manner that says "hip" but "powerful." The book offers helpful advice for women and men complete with photos that show examples of appropriate power casual dress.

The following are some tips that might help in your decision on what to wear for work in order to project a positive and professional image while staying within organizational dress guidelines and allowing yourself a degree of comfort and value.

General Guidelines

- If your job position includes meeting customers or giving presentations, wear clothing that communicates professionalism. Go conservative with the rule of thumb being to wear clothes at or one level above the customer. For example, if you are visiting a company where men traditionally wear button-down collared shirts with no jacket, wear a tie and sports coat or suit.
- Locate and adhere to your organizations dress code. Most organizations have one. If there is not one in writing, ask your supervisor or human resources what is appropriate, rather than depending on guidance from a co-worker who may not know all the rules.
- Stay alert. In business success is often about playing by the rules. Watch to see what your supervisor, President and clients wear.
- Choose clothing that compliments your body type and size.
- Colors coordinate your clothing and choose pieces that are made of quality materials. Polyesters and certain blends often are made of inferior materials and can send a message of cheapness which can damage your professional image. Choose more traditionally quality materials (e.g. wools and wool blends). These do not have to cost a fortune since you can often find new clothing with the original tags still on them at consignment or resale stores in your area.
- Don't follow the guidelines for out-of-office dress on the job. For example, leave the dirty athletic shoes and flip flops or beach sandals at home, avoid those clothes with the stylish holes in them. All of these things might play well in a recreational or party situation with your friends, but often do not work at the office.

- Save your active wear (e.g. jogging suits or warm ups) for the appropriate athletic activity and do not wear them to the office.
- Be conservative with the use of perfumes and colognes.
- Get rid of your “favorites” if fashion styles or your body shape has changed since you purchased the clothes. While you may like the items, they will do little to enhance your image if they are too long, short, tight or loose or if no one else wears the style anymore.
- Make sure that shoes are polished and well maintained. If the soles or heels are worn, repair them or replace the shoes.
- Keep clothing clean and well-maintained at all times.
- Avoid clothing that has words, phrases, or images that might be offensive (e.g. political, religious or other sensitive issues). These have no place in the workplace.
- Watch your grooming by regularly bathing, cleaning and cutting fingernails (and toenails if you wear open-toes shoes), and getting a regular haircut or styling. Related to this last point, keep a comb or brush nearby and use it throughout the day.
- Keep a jacket or sports coat in the office so that you will have it should you be called to an unexpected meeting with a member of senior management or a customer. A conservative style and color are probably best (e.g. a blue or black blazer for men or a beige or other neutral color for women work well).
- Wear your hair styled for the work that you perform. If you work around machinery or office equipment, wear it back or shorter to keep from becoming entangled and injured.

For the Women

- Cover those midriffs, shoulders and arms. Too much visible skin is inappropriate in the workplace and can send a negative message about you. If you wear sleeveless blouses in your office or cubicle, keep a jacket handy to put on when you venture out into other areas of the office or if you are expecting clients or other visitors.
- Choose skirt and dress lengths that allow you to perform job tasks and sit without embarrassing or exposing too much skin.
- If you are going to wear dresses or blouses of sheer material due to heat, dress in layers (e.g. wear a slip or camisole under it).

- Wear hose, if required by organizational standards. You can always put these on when arriving at work and remove them prior to going home if heat is an issue.
- Curtail the amount and style of jewelry you wear. For example, don't wear layers of bangle bracelets or long hanging type earrings. While these might be impressive at a night club or party, the office is not the place for all your bling bling.
- Be conservative in using makeup and perfume and find the type and color that best compliment your face. Most major department stores have cosmetic professionals who can help you determine this and show proper application techniques at no cost.

For the Men

- Tuck in those shirt tails.
- Put on clean socks that match your shoes and trousers, and that have no holes in them.
- Use colognes sparingly. You do not need to announce your coming with fragrances before you even enter a room and should not leave a telltale trail of smells for others to follow five minutes after you leave.
- While a two- to three-day beard stubble might look cool on a movie screen or rock video, it has no value at the workplace. Even if you work in a garage or other environment where casual can mean many things, failing to shave potentially sends a message that you are either too lazy or unprofessional to shave or that you overslept and did not have time to take care of personal hygiene. Either way, you can lose the perception game from others.
- Leave the hiking boots, camouflage clothing and military type attire home for appropriate situations. The workplace is not suitable for such dress unless you work in a sporting goods store or similar environment. Likewise, leave the dirty athletic shoes in your gym bag.
- Baseball caps are fine for the ballpark but not for the office or similar setting. If you work in a professional environment, leave the caps in your car or at home.
- Wear a belt with your trousers since you never know when a button or clasp might fail and you could end up with an embarrassing "wardrobe malfunction".

While this is not an exhaustive listing of possible tips, it can get you started on your way to a better professional image. Check the Internet for other resources and ideas as well as look to your organizations policy and procedure manual for guidance. No matter what

your organizational policy says related to dress, keep in mind that it is your image that ultimately is on the line. The way you look can send a nonverbal message about your attitude, professionalism, socioeconomic status, educational level and impact someone's desire to be around you. All could ultimately impact you personally and financially and ultimately can impact your organization's effectiveness and success with customers.

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