

## *Putting Your Best Look Forward*

# Business Dress for Women

*Marjorie M. Baker, Extension Associate for Clothing and Textiles*

A nice appearance is an investment in your career. Although it will not take the place of a good education or competence in your job, it will enhance those requirements and increase your chances of getting ahead in the business world.

An interviewer's decision not to hire a job applicant is usually made within the first thirty seconds of an interview. That's a lot of sizing up in a little time — mostly on the basis of appearance. The right makeup and hairstyle can make a woman look more professional and not only increase her chance of being hired, but increase her starting salary by as much as 8 to 20 percent.

### The Communication of Clothing

What role do you want to play? Some people unintentionally send out the wrong message. What does your dress say about you? "I don't care." "I'm disorganized." "I'm unaware." "I'm up to date." Clothing will be saying things about you whether you are aware of it or not.

Knowing how to use clothing to establish yourself in whatever role you want to play can help you win that role more quickly.

Dress for the role you would like to play. One rule of thumb says, "Dress for the job above you. The one you would like to have." You will then be more readily associated with that role and seen by superiors as a good candidate.

Your appearance reflects how you feel about yourself and your job. You are not only representing yourself but you are also representing your employer. You may be the only impression a stranger gets when dealing with your business. How you are perceived determines how your office or business is perceived.

The kind of business you represent determines the attributes you will want to project:

- All businesses want to project competence, confidence, and an organized appearance.
- A bank wants to appear conservative and give a no-nonsense atmosphere. If you were employed by a bank, your appearance would need to give that feeling to the customers.
- Advertising, retailing, and any business depending on high fashion want to project a flair for new ideas, excitement, and a reflection that they are "in the know" about the latest fads, within the limits of good taste, of course.
- Businesses that focus on communication like education and real estate fall somewhere in the middle. Openness and warmth along with confidence and competence are important. Dress should be less conservative than in a bank or a law firm, but not as creative as a fashion business.

### Planning Your Business Wardrobe

- Impeccable grooming is a must. Good grooming enhances the most carefully selected apparel, while careless grooming can spoil the whole effect.
- Observe people around you who are well-dressed examples, who look like you'd like to look.
- Look at magazines that illustrate good taste in fashion. The periodicals section of your library carries fashion magazines and magazines of interest to business women.
- Plan what you are going to wear the night before. Don't let yourself have to deal with "wardrobe trauma" every morning. Free your mind for other things.

- If you feel uncomfortable investing your money without some outside advice, make an appointment with a personal shopper, usually employed by the larger department stores. Tell the personal shopper what you already own and the look you would like to have. Be candid about how much you can afford to spend.
- When in doubt, be conservative. Always dress conservatively for a job interview. Clothing for the first day on the job should be conservative, also. Never wear jeans, and it is best to consider a skirted outfit rather than pants.
- Think classic. Your best investments are styles that will not be outdated and short-lived. You will always feel dressed appropriately and in good taste. Save the “trendy” items for your fun time and plan to spend less money for styles that will be around for a brief period.
- Don’t fall for fads. They are poor investments and they reflect an air of frivolity when you want to appear serious.
- Keep your shoes clean, well polished, and well heeled. Give new shoes a coating of protective wax before wearing and stuff them with tissue when they aren’t being worn. Be aware of how much effect your shoes have on your total look.
- Generally, the most successful colors for business wardrobes are in the neutral or muted shades. Save the brilliant, wild combinations for your off-duty fun or use them as accents.
- Fit is important. Ease is the rule. Tight fitting or low cut garments detract in any outfit, but they are especially out of place in a work atmosphere. A-line skirts are a good choice over pencil straight skirts that ride up when you sit or very full skirts that require a lot of attention. Save the mini-skirts for less serious times.
- Do not wear bangle bracelets, dangle earrings, or any other jewelry that can distract or inhibit your work.
- Buy the best quality you can afford and learn to recognize good quality in a garment. This does not always mean the most expensive item. However, an item that is an expensive initial investment that will be worn often over many years may not cost as much in the long run as several cheaper items that have to be discarded or that spend a lot of time in the closet.



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- Apply the cost per wearing formula to higher priced items: number of wearings per month x the number of years it will be in your wardrobe = total wearings. Cost of item divided by total wearings = cost per wearing.
- Analyze your current wardrobe and make a plan to include those items you need for a serviceable business wardrobe. Consider your lifestyle needs and make your major investments accordingly.
- Although you will want some printed fabrics in your wardrobe, for flexibility, approximately 70% of your clothes should be solids.
- Consider the expense of upkeep for your wardrobe, both in time and money. Often fabric blends that combine the beauty of natural fibers with the easy-care properties of synthetics provide the answer. Stay away from the “polyester look.” The most desirable fabrics for business clothes are those that look, feel, and respond like natural fibers; whether they are or not is not important.
  - Choose fabrics that are appropriate for business wear. Velvets, satins, and chiffons are not for the office.
  - Look for year-around fabrics. Wools blended with polyester, nylon, or acrylic can be worn except during very hot weather. Rayon, silk and some cotton can be worn during all seasons
    - Leisure wear, such as jogging outfits, or casual pants and T-shirts are not appropriate business attire.
- Genuine leather shoes and bags are good business accessory items. Pumps are good choices. An open toe and closed heel is suitable but sandals are too casual. Wear boots for protection in bad weather and take them off at work.
- Neutral hosiery is best. Do not go bare-legged to work, even if you are extremely tan and the weather is extremely hot.
- Belts give a finished look to an outfit. Even if all that shows is the buckle, wear a belt with skirts.
- If you have a tendency to perspire, use dress shields, especially when wearing silk.
- Go easy on perfume. You should never wear it in excess, especially in a business setting.
- Be discreet. Revealing clothes are never appropriate for offices. This includes plunging necklines and see-through fabrics.



*Tiny turnoffs are those small things that leave a negative impression.*

Here's a checklist of image destroyers:

- Chewing gum
- Scruffy shoes
- Slip or bra strap showing
- Visible bra or panty line
- Dirt or stains anywhere
- Bare feet (in sandals) obviously in need of a pedicure
- Bare legs, even in summer
- Torn stockings
- Rubber bands in the hair
- Chipped nail polish
- Dyed or bleached hair with roots needing retouching
- Nicotine-stained fingers
- Pierced ears with no earrings
- Unpressed scarves
- Hems in need of repair
- Worn-off lipstick
- Dirty hair
- Rough elbows
- Toe-reinforced stockings worn with sandals
- Skirts that cling to the derriere
- Perspiration-stained clothes
- Loose or missing buttons

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Written by Patty Rai Smith (retired)  
Revised by Marjorie M. Baker

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