

Marketing Yourself, Part 2: The Unwritten Dress Code: How to Dress for the Job Interview

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We all know the clichés: “Dress for success,” “Clothes make the man (or woman),” “The first impression is a lasting impression.” Are they true or are they just hype? When you are going for a job interview, the answer is that the impression you make is critical to your success in being hired, and the way you dress is a key factor.

One problem for health professionals is that although there is a substantial body of literature on dressing for job interviews, the focus tends to be on managerial candidates in the conventional corporate world. Experts emphasize the importance of the corporate culture in determining what dress is appropriate (Ballard, 1999; Greater Cincinnati Convention and Visitors Bureau, 1997; Hayes, 1999). But what if your corporate culture is a psychiatric department, where every day is casual Friday, or an operating room? It is doubtful you will find yourself at a conference table reviewing department procedure in scrubs. Even in an environment where a necktie may seem as old-fashioned as an Elizabethan ruff, potential employers favor the candidate who makes an effort to dress well (Cantore, 1998). The advice of Cassandra Hayes (1999) transcends all occupational boundaries: “When in doubt, your best bet is to stick with a suit or appropriate business attire” (p. 73).

Two words appear constantly in the literature on appropriate dress for the job interview. The first is conservative; the second is professional. You may pride yourself on your independent thinking and innovation, but these are qualities you will convey by the way you respond to questions during your interview. The last thing you want is for your clothing to get more attention than

your job qualifications (Greater Cincinnati Convention and Visitors Bureau, 1997; Schmalz, 1987). Studies have found that despite popular beliefs that conservative attire is important only in conservative occupations such as banking, for women especially, a well-tailored business suit is associated with professional competence and authority (Ballard, 1999; Forsythe, 1987, 1990; Molloy, 1996). In fact, one of the few articles specifically targeting health professionals stresses the importance of dress that is “fashionably conservative” (DeMello & Pagan, 1998). Employers are looking for candidates who display “logical creativity,” which is associated with a conservative look, rather than a flair for aesthetic details (Gibson & Balkwell, 1990).

SUITING UP

The global appeal of a tailored suit for both women and men actually works in your favor, especially if you are a new graduate on a tight budget. Instead of having to buy a variety of outfits to fit different corporate cultures, a few basic items are all you need for your job-hunting wardrobe.

The focus is on quality, not quantity. When choosing your fabric, pick the best-quality fabrics you can afford (Schmalz, 1987). Clinton T. Greenleaf III (1998), an expert on professional dress and behavior, states, “High-quality clothes and accessories help you look great with less effort and are a better investment.” In addition, high-quality clothing will probably enhance your self-confidence as well as your chances of getting

Health Promotion Practice / July 2000 / Vol. 1, No. 3, 229-233
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the job (Greater Cincinnati Convention and Visitors Bureau, 1997).

The natural fibers are always in style: cotton, linen, wool, and silk (Schmalz, 1987). Cotton and linen have one disadvantage: Both wrinkle easily. However, this effect can be minimized by having your garments professionally laundered or dry-cleaned. Regardless of fabric, in fact, the best way to guarantee you will look your best is to keep your suits, shirts, blouses, scarves, and ties professionally cleaned and pressed (Greenleaf, 1998).

Climate is a major factor in the type of fabric you choose. For women, wool or wool blends are best in winter or cooler climates; linen and cotton, solo or blended with synthetics, are fine for summer (DeMello & Pagragan, 1998). For men, wool or wool blends are perennial classics. Wool blends require less maintenance than pure wool. They are also more affordable, but look for a suit with the highest proportion of natural fiber you can afford. Be sure the natural fiber is at least 65% (Schmalz, 1987).

Is it possible to go to too much expense? According to one seasoned executive, the answer is yes. A young applicant in an expensive suit may be conveying the message that mom and dad are still paying the bills, connoting a lack of independence (Levey, 1999). The executive also swears he prefers worn clothes to clothes that are "too new." Greenleaf (1998), advocate of the impeccable, would vehemently disagree.

Although a preference for worn clothing may be unusual, a preference against overdressing is not. No matter your flair for fashion, understatement is always in style (Career City, 1999). Avoid faddish attire. Not only do you run the risk of looking like a fashion victim, but trendy garments tend to be less adaptable in matching with other items. They usually have short life spans as well, making them poor investments. And although expensive suits are not a mistake, they are certainly not a necessity. The keynote is to shop carefully. You can find good-quality suits and accessories at reasonable prices through discount chains as well as department stores like Lord & Taylor and Macy's (Ballard, 1999).

Women frequently ask whether pantsuits are appropriate for an interview. A well-tailored pantsuit is considered appropriate by most experts, but a skirt and jacket may appear more authoritative (Ballard, 1999). John T. Molloy (1996) has for the last 25 years been conducting nationwide surveys of how male and female executives perceive female managerial candidates

based on their attire. In the early years, a skirt and jacket was the defining look for success. Most executives, female and male, rejected women in both dresses and pants. By the early 1990s, the clothing of applicants became less important as a predictor of their perceived managerial qualities, presumably a reflection of the greater acceptance of women in business. In the most recent survey, however, the trend had reversed. Despite the proliferation of women in management (as well as casual Fridays), only two women in attire other than the traditional (skirted) suit were perceived as management material, whereas all the women in traditional business clothes were selected.

Does this mean that attitudes toward women at work have gone backward? Actually, it may mean the reverse. People are more comfortable when appearance is consistent with expectations (Forsythe, 1990). The businesswoman in her tailored jacket and sleek skirt has become an integral part of our culture, just like her male counterpart in his suit and tie. These styles have come to symbolize authority, expertise, and rationality. A departure for either men or women may be perceived as incongruous with our expectations.

Is it possible to look too managerial when your role is to provide compassionate care? According to one survey, whereas women wearing traditional suits were perceived as having more "masculine" managerial qualities (e.g., leadership ability, assertiveness, responsibility, objectivity), they were not seen as having fewer "feminine" managerial qualities, such as intuitiveness, helpfulness, humanistic values, and efficiency (Forsythe, 1987). Both sets of qualities are combined in the health professional. DeMello and Pagragan (1998) emphasize the importance of conveying a professional image.

A final caution for women and men alike: Be sure your suit fits! This may seem obvious, but it is often overlooked. Never wear clothes that are tight. For women, a skirt should fall to the knee (Hanson, 1997). The best way to judge an ideal fit is to stand in front of a full-length mirror and check your fit from all angles (*USA Today*, 1996).

You can use the following checklist for buying a well-made suit:

- Select the right color (details on that below).
- Choose the right fabric for your climate.
- Investigate pattern matching—if you choose a fabric with a pattern, such as a pinstripe, be sure it matches at the seams and throughout the suit.

- Look at the seams—puckered seams mean poor workmanship.
- Check the stitching—hand-sewn stitches are a mark of quality, so expect to pay more.
- Check out the jacket collar—soft fabrics adapt to the contours of your neck better than stiff ones.
- Lapel points should be well-defined.
- Check the shoulder line—it should be smooth and should lie flat.
- Examine the sleeve heads to be sure you have both comfort and freedom of movement.
- Inspect the lining—a lined jacket means better quality and more mileage.
- Be sure vents are properly aligned.
- Check for reinforcement—a waistband that is not reinforced may roll when worn (Schmalz, 1987).

SHIRTS AND BLOUSES

Greenleaf (1998) advises that men stock up on white shirts. The reason is more practical than traditional: White shirts go with everything, and all it takes is a change of tie to change the look of your suit. If you get tired of seeing white, a long-sleeved shirt in a light, solid color is equally appropriate although a bit trickier to match with the right tie (muted is best) (DeMello & Pagragan, 1998). Certain patterns are also appropriate for an interview. The most acceptable patterns are pinstripe, chalkstripe, traditional stripe, wide-space chalkstripe, British stripe, and simple wide stripe. Business box and business plaid are also acceptable although less common. Anything more elaborate should be reserved for casual wear (Schmalz, 1987).

For women, your best bet is either a heavyweight silk or tailored cotton blouse (DeMello & Pagragan, 1998; Hanson, 1997). A white blouse conveys the most professional message.

Like your suit, your blouse or shirt should fit well and be professionally cleaned and pressed. Never assume that because it is tucked away under your jacket, your shirt is less important. Although it may be unlikely an interview will involve removing your jacket to give a hands-on demonstration of your clinical skills, you might try to imagine it will involve exactly that as an incentive to keep all items in your wardrobe in impeccable condition.

COLOR CODING

Choosing the right color is an integral part of choosing the right suit. Colors convey a psychological message as well as a visual one (Schmalz, 1987). These are

some of the psychological attributes of colors, arranged from high to low credibility.

- Black is reliable, honest, independent, and intimidating.
- Navy is trustworthy, practical, dependable, and loyal.
- Brown is thrifty, enduring, affectionate, and comfortable.
- Gray is supportive, skillful, economical, and objective.
- Ivory is mannered, graceful, polished, and respectful.
- Red is ambitious, dominant, impetuous, and imaginative.
- White is cheerful, kind, spirited, and unspoiled.
- Yellow is clever, charming, enlightened, and gregarious.
- Green is calculating, analytical, neighborly, and critical.
- Beige is indifferent, absolute, self-sacrificing, and methodical.
- Pink and peach are passive, simple, cooperative, and demure.
- Orange is obstinate, frivolous, energetic, and friendly (Schmalz, 1987).

You will note that black conveys three very positive qualities. However, there is the fourth one: intimidating. This may be the reason that black is not always well received. Black may be the perfect color for formal wear, but in business it tends to send out negative messages (Schmalz, 1987). Black pinstripes with a white shirt or blouse may be a good alternative. Not all experts, however, advise against wearing black (Ballard, 1998; DeMello & Pagragan, 1998). The way you look and feel in black may be the decisive factor.

The two colors that invariably receive the highest ratings for professional appearance are navy and charcoal gray (Ballard, 1999; DeMello & Pagragan, 1998; *USA Today*, 1996). Studies show that people prefer dull to brighter colors for wearing apparel (Radeloff, 1991). In addition to conveying a professional image, duller colors tend to flatter all shapes and sizes and coloring. Tweeds or herringbone are acceptable for men, but women will do best by sticking with solid colors or at most a conservative pinstripe (Ballard, 1998).

Sunseri and Kosteva (1991) state succinctly, “Because a tie often is the only distinctive clothing accent for a conservative business suit, men should pay special attention to their ties” (p. 106). The most critical point is to double-check to be sure your tie is free of all spots and stains. Once you determine your tie is not in need of dry-cleaning, the next step is determining whether it goes with your suit and shirt. Neckwear for women is optional, but the same rules apply: free of blemishes and well-matched with your suit.

Even matching, however, may not be enough. After all, if your suit is charcoal or navy and your blouse or

shirt is white, you have many color options for neckwear. Or do you?

Observers tend to favor cool colors over warm colors (Radeloff, 1991). Colors in this group are blues, blue-reds, purples, and greens. The exception to this rule is red. In studies of color preferences, red and blue elicit consistently high ratings (Radeloff, 1990). There may actually be a biological component to this choice: The average person's eye may be most comfortable with light from the red and blue regions of the spectrum (Lind, 1993). Not surprisingly, red and blue are staples of neckwear and are interwoven in many designs. A word of caution: Stay away from orange and red-orange. Eye-catching oranges are fine for the beach but a serious mistake in a job interview!

THE RIGHT ACCESSORIES

According to Jean Ann Cantore (1998), many people are surprised to learn that shoes get more attention at a job interview than any other apparel. Wearing good (and well-polished) shoes shows that you pay attention to details.

For women, shoes should be the classic, stocky-heeled pumps, in black, navy, gray, or brown, depending on the tone of your suit. Heels should be about 1½ to 2 inches high, and shoes should be worn with neutral, skin-toned panty hose (Ballard, 1999). For men, black shoes and socks are never a mistake (Greenleaf, 1998).

A wristwatch is an integral part of a professional image, but otherwise, keep jewelry simple; no more than one ring per hand. Rules for earrings are traditional: two (small) earrings for women; none for men (Cantore, 1998).

The day of the interview is arriving, and you want to be sure you have everything right. Here is a simple list of dos and don'ts for proper attire:

Dos

- Think conservative: Choose a traditional business suit, preferably navy or charcoal gray.
- Choose the best-quality fabrics you can afford.
- White shirts and blouses are your best bet. They are always appropriate and go with everything.
- Be sure your clothes are carefully cleaned and pressed.
- Pay attention to details: well-made garments, good fit, unspotted ties, well-matched accessories, polished shoes.

- For neckwear, choose patterns with reds and blues; stay away from bright, warm colors, such as orange.
- Choose classic business shoes topped by traditional hose.
- Keep jewelry simple.
- Keep hair neat.
- Choose leather for shoes, purses, or briefcases. For a perfect look, leave purse and briefcases home and carry a sleek leather envelope.

Don'ts

- Stay away from faddish clothes.
- Never wear clothes that are tight.
- No jeans, sneakers, or other casual wear. Even classic sweaters are not appropriate for an interview.
- Don't try to be a work of art: no heavy makeup, visible tattoos, or multiple earrings.
- Never neglect your shoes. Shoes that are worn or scuffed detract from a professional image.

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