

What It Really Means to Dress for Success by Carol Kinsey Goman

My friend Joyce is an entrepreneur. One of the secrets of her success is the way she dresses. Even when traveling for a vacation, Joyce is in a business suit and heels. Her motto: "Wear great clothes. You never know whom you'll meet!"

She may be onto something.

You can't not communicate. Everything you do makes some kind of statement. The fact that Joyce wears a business suit and not jeans and a tee shirt when she travels sends a message.

The old saying, "You can't judge a book by its cover" may be true, but book jacket and product packaging designers around the world have created an industry betting that people do judge and purchase products based on how they look. And career counselors still advise their clients to dress for the job they want - not the job they currently have. Counselors know that people are evaluated by their appearance (this is a key body language element in first impressions), and they want their clients to gain a nonverbal advantage by already "looking the part."

Office-appropriate attire has certainly changed over the years. Formal business suits aren't a requirement in many workplaces, but the options available often lead to some questionable choices. As one management consultant told me: "In today's world of business casual, it sometimes does seem like 'anything goes.' To be fair, most of my clients' employees display common sense when making their fashion statements... but I've also seen some less-than-subtle expressions of taste (or lack thereof), even in critical engagements."

Clothes make a strong visual statement about how you see yourself. Comfort may aid productivity but, in this era of "Me, Inc." and "the Brand Called You," are flip-flops, sweats, jeans, and flashy or revealing clothing part of how you want to be judged? You might think you are expressing your individuality, but you could also be sending the message that you're not a serious professional.

Appropriate dress is also a way of expressing respect for the situation and the people in it. So, your look may change depending on the business circumstances. Teresa is a public relations professional – and a master at dressing for the role. She loves to wear hot pink, turquoise and fire-engine red silk dresses with stiletto heels and lots of bling to work in her New York City office. But the moment she has to meet with a conservative client, or one who is going through difficult times, Teresa transforms herself into a prim professional whose outfit matches the way she wants to be perceived. (In her words, "The success I dress for is that of my client.") One member of her staff recalls meeting Teresa at the headquarters of a nonprofit religious organization where they were to conduct focus groups. The staff member barely recognized her stylish boss. By dressing more like the client, Teresa fit right in. She looked like one of the nuns!

Clothing has an effect on both the wearer and the observer. It has been proven that people are more likely to give money (charitable donations, tips) or information to someone if that person is well dressed. And if you ever watch actors in a play go through their first dress rehearsal, you'll see firsthand the amazing transformation that becomes possible only when people dress for the part.

Experiment with your appearance. Notice how people react to you when you wear certain colors or styles. Then, based on those reactions and your career goals, you can make an informed decision about how you want to “package” yourself.