

Sports & Money



Style

What Not To Wear To Work

Laura Sinberg 07.22.09, 12:15 PM ET

Many professional women are guilty of multiple fashion faux pas without realizing it, and their lack of judgment can sometimes lead to being passed over for a job or promotion.

Experts agree that one of the biggest fashion mistakes women make, for example, is showing too much cleavage.

"It's distracting and inappropriate in a business environment," says Ginger Burr, president of Total Image Consultants in Lynn, Mass., and author of *Fashion Secrets Mother Never Taught You*.

In Pictures: Dressing For Business, Not Pleasure

Dressing too sexy can also have psychological effects on your peers, according to Peter Glick, a professor of psychology at Lawrence University in Wisconsin. A study by Glick that was published in *Psychology of Women Quarterly* indicates that women in high-level positions who dress in what is seen as sexy attire are viewed as less competent--regardless of their skill sets. These women are passed over for promotions more often than their more modestly dressed female colleagues.

So if you want to get ahead in the workplace, better rethink that low-cut top.

The Unspoken Rules

If you're confused about what is appropriate, you aren't alone, says Barbara Pachter, an etiquette expert who advises companies like Pfizer and Microsoft, noting that a surprising number of executive women admit to not knowing what styles suit their bodies.

In fact, many women wear clothes that are either too big or not tailored properly, a fashion snafu that is easily avoided, says Pachter, who advises buying clothes at department stores with on-site tailors or simply patronizing your neighborhood tailor.

Details are important, adds Burr, whose home-study program, "Who Taught You How to Dress," helps clients navigate some of these issues. She tells of a client who was passed over for a promotion for a detail as small as scuffed shoes. "There were two people who were equally qualified for the position, and in the end it came down to one candidate was wearing shoes that were scuffed," she says. "The company wondered whether that would translate in a work [environment] to other details being overlooked."

Even politicians and celebrities have to polish their looks in the hopes of furthering their careers. Hillary Clinton is a prime example. More than once she has revamped her look and wardrobe--sometimes criticized as too severe and masculine--to include more traditionally feminine touches, like pastel suits, in an effort to emphasize her role as a wife and mother and relate more to the voting public.

Assess Your Work Environment

According to James McDonald Jr., a partner at the Irvine, Calif., offices of labor and employment law firm Fisher & Phillips, it is generally legal for an employer to institute an employee dress code. But you don't need to read a company manual to see what is and what is not appropriate to wear to work. The best advice experts give is to simply look around the office: Are the female VPs wearing stockings in the summer months? Is your manager one who rarely takes off her jacket or, perhaps, does she favor short skirts and skinny jeans? The fashion and social service industries, for instance, ordinarily have much more relaxed dress codes than, say, law firms.

Even if your position doesn't require you to see outside clients, you are still "making an impression on your boss [and] your potential future boss," notes Heather Kleis, a human resources adviser for insurance company ING.

While women may have more options about what to wear in the workplace, they also have more room for misstep, notes psychology professor Glick. "What's a man going to wear, a pair of Dockers and a button-down shirt, as opposed to a tie and a shirt?" Pit that scenario against a woman whose maxi dress is semi-transparent and, well, the impact on their respective reputations hardly compares.

Common Mistakes Women Make

In general, there are wardrobe selections women should always avoid in the workplace. In addition to the aforementioned maxi dress, wearing clothing that reveals your bra or panty lines is inappropriate office attire. Period. Ditto for micro-mini skirts and sheer clothing without a lining or cover-up.

Summer is a season that opens the door to a slew of potential fashion landmines for professional women, including spaghetti-strap tops and gladiator sandals, a hot-ticket item that should be avoided unless the dress code is so laid back that "everyone, including higher-ups, is wearing flip flops," Burr says.

So is being overly conservative the key to advancing? Not necessarily, says Glick. Although it can't hurt to err on the side of caution, asserting a little bit of individuality and personal style can boost your confidence and ability. As elsewhere in your business, it pays to stay one step ahead of the expected.

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