Clothes Make the Business Type

A Clothing/Fashion Consultant Comments on the Proper Dress For the Well-Dressed Executive

By Jeremy Walsh  
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The trouble with most people,” said Paul Mathensen, clothing designer and fashion consultant in New York City’s clothing district, “is that they not only don’t know how to dress, they don’t care either.”

“How about contractors?” I asked him.

The shrug was significant. “They’re people, aren’t they?”

Mathensen has spent a lifetime career in clothing and is a firm believer in the philosophy that clothes make the man and the woman.

“Truth is, a whole new approach is rapidly developing when it comes to men and women dressing for business,” he said, “and — as with the men — it’s astonishing how much women are missing the advantages that proper attire can bring to a business situation.

“Women are a bit better at dressing than most men — but not much.”

While 23 years of research in wardrobe should qualify him to dictate some rules, Mathensen is quick to avoid any such role. He calls himself merely an observer and reporter of surveys on what successful contractors and other people are wearing and how the right clothes can provide the edge for a business deal, help a woman to gain acceptance in her commercial role, and simply advance the possibilities for success.

Mathensen’s surveys fall into two broad categories. The first involves what people are actually wearing in business and social situations as well as at differing income and occupational levels.

The second is called reaction research. This involves the effect or impact that particular types of accessories and clothing have on various respondents.

From all of his research, Mathensen claims that the worst mistake that men make is to allow their clothing to be selected by wives, girlfriends, or sales clerks. Or they allow designers or fashion consultants to dictate what they wear, or they allow their backgrounds to influence their selection of a wardrobe.

Any one of these mistakes is an effort to dress for failure, he said. And women?

“They’re as bad as the men when it comes to allowing the fashion designers to cast a spell over them. And they also allow their socio-economic background to dictate their clothing choices,” Mathensen complained.

Women also still tend to view themselves as sex objects despite all the noise from the feminist movement. This can be destructive in a business atmosphere because research shows that dressing to succeed in a business atmosphere and dressing to be sexually attractive are mutually exclusive goals.

No Strict Rules On Proper Wear

Obviously, the part of the country you’re in will dictate the weight of outfits you wear, but the rule to remember is dress codes are inherent in different regions of the country.

For example, a dark gray pinstripe suit is generally accepted as proper attire in the Northeast. A light gray suit is Southern. Let a Southerner wear his light gray suit north and he shouts out his region.

When an obvious non-Southerner wears his dark gray to the South he’s immediately tagged a “damn Yankee.” Strangely enough, though, if a Southerner wears that same dark gray pinstripe in the South he gains authority.

Formal attire is at home in the Northeast and clothing tends to become more informal as you go West and Southwest. Color variations become noticeable too.

For the most part, shades of brown when worn east of Pittsburgh are much less accepted. The Northeast...
is the home for blue and gray — all the way from Boston to Washington, D.C. The colors tend to become more liberal as you go west.

These two variation trails end in Southern California where just about anything goes. It’s important to note that the Southern California look simply can’t be transported to any other place in North America and be accepted.

A gold chain and medallion may be fine in Los Angeles but it’s viewed with suspicion in business environments elsewhere.

To Mathensen the rule is fundamental: try to wear what is appropriate to the place you’re in. You wouldn’t wear a pinstripe on the golf course.

And only in the deep South, in the summer, and in the Southwest and Far West can you sit down to a business lunch without a coat and tie and still be considered satisfactorily dressed.

**Dresses Are Out For Women’s Wear**

For women — executive women, that is — dresses are out in a business atmosphere. She should be wearing a skirted suit.

If for some reason she does decide to wear a dress then she should have a blazer for extra warmth. She should never, never wear a sweater.

She shouldn’t wear a sweater if she wants to be perceived as a business executive. With the happy exception of being a sex object, she can go for the frilly, little-girl kinds of dresses, the low cut dress, and bask in the glory of being adorable and cute.

“Women really do have a little bit . . . just a little bit, now . . . harder time dressing for a business situation then men,” Mathensen conceded, “but it still boils down to the question of whether she wants to dress for the ‘bedroom or the boardroom.’ In other words, they need to decide what it is they want to sell and then package things accordingly."

Sexymenwomen belong to the secretarial level; well groomed business women look like well groomed business women.

**Summary on Dressing For Business Success**

Here Are Some Suggestions From Paul Mathensen on Dressing For Business

**FOR MEN**

- Try to avoid Green
- Avoid bulky or flamboyant jewelry
- Neckties should be expensive, non-gaudy — and avoid bow ties because they are equated with unpredictability
- Keep your suit jacket on in a meeting or office visit to maintain authority — and never, never smoke a pipe or let anyone know you own one (pipesmokers are perceived as annoyingly obfuscated)

**FOR WOMEN**

- At the office wear good-quality, skirted suits — and never wear a sweater over a blouse or dress.
- Shun the “imitation man look” because it destroys your authority

Where a woman’s dressing problem begins, though, is that fuzzy line where businesslike attire is suddenly perceived as “mannish looking” or the “imitation man look."

When respondents see this their reaction is more negative than had the woman executive gone for the frilly look. In any event, the woman loses authority — the ultimate criteria.

**Pantsuits?**

Research, Mathensen said, shows a good skirted suit proclaims you as upper middle class executive type: an obviously cheap polyester pantsuit says you’re not. It’s as simple as that.

That best “business uniform” for women is a skirted suit and blouse. The suit should be dark, in most cases, and the blouse should contrast with the skirt and jacket. It’s best to remember that this is a uniform and is appropriate for business occasions. For social occasions, a dress is preferable.

Clothing should always be regarded as a tool, and should be appropriate for the occasion and the kind of people with whom you are dealing. When going to a meeting with business owners and financial types, a contractor would be well advised to dress conservatively.

Designers, architects, and engineers often achieve less formal attire, but it’s still best to dress conservatively. These people deal with conservative types, too, and perhaps will be dressed for that contingency, Mathensen warned.

For a contractor who wants to improve his business and his status in his community, the rule is the same as it is for a top echelon business executive: dress expensively and in good taste. When you do that you’re perceived of as successful — and people like to deal with other successful people.

Your expensive, well groomed appearance enhances and promotes the self-image of those with whom you deal.

The proper clothing gives you authority, presence, and the look of success.