



# Polished and Polite

An etiquette brief on dress and decorum for women  
by Civility Experts Worldwide

## Introduction

Professional image is frequently the topic of workplace discussions with women (and men) at all levels of business. What is semi, casual, business appropriate anyway? How do we decide what to wear and how do we best represent ourselves and our company?

Along with being motivated, educated, trained, and skilled at the work we do, professionals are constantly attentive to what kind of image they are projecting to co-workers, higher-ups, and clients. Regardless of whether we are aware of it or not, we are always interviewing and it is in our best interest to consistently put our best foot forward.

For an expanded lesson plan including activities and answer keys, please visit the shopping cart at [www.etiquettetrainingtoolkits.com](http://www.etiquettetrainingtoolkits.com)

### **Professional Dress for Women (Excerpt)**

Success is determined by a combination of skills, timing, attitude, communication skills, social IQ and image. Although one can find success even if she lacks one of the above listed qualities, success will come easier if she has some of all of them. In addition, how you feel about yourself is projected in how you look and if you want to appear credible and be judged competent you need to project confidence, one of the simplest ways to do this is through a professional image.

### **Quotes and Anecdotes**

*“Beauty of style and harmony and grace and good rhythm depend on simplicity”*

- Plato

*“Our self image, strongly held, essentially determines what we become”*

- Maxwell Maltz

*“An individual’s self-concept is the core of his personality. It affects every aspect of human behaviour: the ability to learn, the capacity to grow and change. A strong, positive self-image is the best possible preparation for success in life.”*

- Dr. Joyce Brothers

*“It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances”*

- Oscar Wilde

### **Reference and Research**

Professional Presence: The Total Program for Gaining That Extra Edge in Business - by America’s Top Corporate Image Consultant

Author: Susan Bixler

Publisher: Berkley Publishing Group, Jan 9, 1992

The New Professional Image: Dress Your Best for Every Business Situation

Author: Susan Bixler

Publisher Adams Media Corporation, March 1, 2005

Buff and Polish: A Practical Guide to Enhance Your Professional Image And Communication Style

Author: Kathryn J Volin

Publisher: Pentagon Publishing, Jan 1 1999

Ask any style-conscious woman in her 50's and 60's and she will tell you that what all the magazines say about "trends repeating themselves" or "everything old will be new again" is absolutely true. Of course there are usually a few modern tweaks (just enough that you'd have to tailor your parents' old clothes to actually wear them when the style comes around again) but a lot of the basics of fashion do seem to be repeated over the decades. In addition "classic style" which includes well-fitted clothes and simple lines in basic colours really, it seems, never does go out of style.

Professionals in modern business circles understand that "success" requires insight as well as the right attitude. As you climb the corporate ladder you will need to acquire knowledge and skills that set you apart from the competition. Knowing how to look and act like a professional is synonymous to being a professional. Professionalism overall is a combination of confidence, competence, courtesy, attitude, demeanor, and image.

There's more to personal presence than an expensive suit- grooming, posture, poise and attitude all play important roles. Knowledge about how to present yourself professionally helps give you a powerful edge over the competition.

Research on first impressions indicates that in the first 15-30 seconds people make overt, deliberate decisions about whether or not you are "their kind of person", and whether or not they will even approach you, on the basis of your outward, physical appearance. This is significant and reinforces the notion that it doesn't matter how smart you are, how many degrees you have, what a great communicator you might be, etc, if you never get a chance to show anyone any of that because they dismiss you, or do not approach you purely on the basis of your image/appearance. Sounds harsh, and intellectually we all know it's immature and unreasonable (not to mention often inaccurate) to judge people this way, but we're human and we do it!

### **PROFESSIONAL DEMEANOR**

Studies show that casual attire often leads to casual attitude and that an overall impression of respect and courtesy in the workplace is exhibited through a combination of attitude, image and demeanor. Accordingly, modern business dress codes also include guidelines for demeanor. Because there has been a tremendous decline in common sense in some workplaces, behaviors that seem obvious are included so that there is no room for misunderstanding between employers and employees.

#### ***Behaviors to avoid when presenting a professional image:***

- 1) Being late to work and/or scheduled workplace meetings and events.

## Professional Dress for Women

- 2) Harsh tone or rude gestures directed towards peers or higher ups.
- 3) Using inappropriate language.
- 4) Lounging (i.e. putting your feet up on desks, lying on the floor, or any other general slovenly behavior)
- 5) Chewing gum.
- 6) Baseball caps, hats and other headgear including sunglasses are to be removed when in the workplace environment.
- 7) Personal hygiene in workplace including at your desk; things like filing nails, combing hair, shaving, applying make-up etc. These activities should be conducted in the washroom only.
- 8) Personal telephone calls, email correspondence or visits on company time.
- 9) Eating in workplace areas where clients visit and/or at your desk or workspace at non-scheduled times. Foods that have a strong smell are messy or noisy to eat should be avoided. (Although coffee and/or other non-alcoholic beverages are allowed)
- 10) Coming to work or meetings unprepared or deliberately leaving others unprepared.
- 11) Gossiping, badmouthing and general negativity.
- 12) Ignoring co-workers or encouraging/prolonging strife and stressful situations.

Did you know that professional image is directly related to each of the following?

- How credible people think we are
- How confident we look
- How service-oriented others perceive us to be
- How well we are received by co-workers
- How productive we are (there are studies to support this)
- How we speak (word choice, tone of voice)
- How we move (body language, posture)
- How much people think we're worth, e.g., what we get paid
- How educated people think we are
- What rank or title people assume we have achieved

The New Collins English dictionary defines appearance as “the outward aspect of a person or thing.”

In today’s business world, it’s hard to tell whether people are just lost when it comes to deciding what to wear in the work environment or whether they have simply forgotten the significant impact that appearance makes on their professional image and achievements. Whether we choose to admit it or not, our outward appearance says a lot about us and the goal when dressing for business is to make first impressions positive impressions. You usually only get one chance!

### **Tips and Techniques for Looking Professional Top-to-Bottom**

The leading experts at Civility Experts Worldwide suggest that one of the quickest ways to clear up some of the confusion about what is appropriate dress is to avoid using the terms “casual” and “appropriate” altogether. Instead, they refer to what is currently considered appropriate professional dress as “Performance Attire”. Performance attire is “that clothing which enables a professional to complete any/all activities he/she might be called upon to complete in a day with confidence”.

So for example, when an executive gets up in the morning and is deciding what to wear he asks himself, what could I potentially be required to do today, and what clothing can I choose that will help me perform all those duties, and present myself and my company in the most positive way? Let’s see, possible responsibilities/activities include:

- Working at my desk
- The boss could come in at the last minute and invite me to lunch
- I may have to pick a client up at the airport
- Clients may show up unexpectedly
- Roger could be sick and I might have to do his presentation at the conference
- I may have to go out into the field and do a couple of sales calls
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Knowing that any/all of this is possible, the professional woman chooses a sleeveless blouse and jacket (firm fabrics and a collar) with comfortable flat leather shoes. She tucks a scarf and a 2-inch pair of heels into her briefcase, just in case. She chooses clean, ironed, easy-wear pants (dressy enough to lunch with the boss or do a presentation for 60 people), she brings along some breath freshener and an extra pair of nylon socks as well as a small cosmetics bag with lipstick, face powder and hairspray.

Not only is this professional prepared and looking the part, she is also focused on the business priority. This means that she is thinking about the job, his accountability to the company, clients, and co-workers (she knows she has a responsibility to look and do her best because it's not about her, it's about the company)

Dressing appropriately is imperative. You will be judged on your appearance, which includes how you dress, how you carry yourself and your body language. Don't forget first impressions and corporate image play a significant role in modern business interactions. A professional image is fundamental to surviving in competitive business arenas. Ask yourself these three questions when you get dressed:

- i. Does this clothing fit me properly? Is it too tight, too loose or too short?
- ii. Does this article of clothing, pair of shoes, handbag look worn out or outdated? (You should not wear garments that are torn, patched or obviously mended to work, ever!)
- iii. Am I dressed appropriately for my position and responsibilities? Do not wear sneakers, tank tops, tee shirts or revealing clothing to work if you hope to gain the respect of your clients, peers or higher ups.

One hint with regard to business dress is to dress as though you hold a position higher in rank than where you actually are in the company. Dress for success!

### **Posture**

Many of us do not realize the implications of poor posture. The reality is that even sitting incorrectly at your desk can cause health problems such as back pain and headaches. The way a woman conducts herself in a professional environment is indicative of what she is about. Executives, colleagues and clients are much more likely to take notice of a woman who stands tall and holds her head high than a woman who tends to slouch and avoids eye contact. Not to say that snobbery is encouraged but a healthy level of confidence and pride is hard to ignore.

Posture can accentuate clothing; standing tall avoids bunching and shows that you are comfortable in the clothing you are wearing and that your clothing suits the image you are trying to portray. If you dress well but cannot hold yourself properly in the clothing, people may think that you are uncomfortable in your own skin and that your clothing does not match your self-image.

**For information about building a basic wardrobe, managing your body image, hairstyles, types of handbags, wearing scarves, and much more, please see the expanded version of this Brief available at [www.culturalcompetence.ca](http://www.culturalcompetence.ca) (Click on the shopping cart)**

You can find some tips and ideas on hair styles and related topics at:

<http://www.hair-styles.org/>

<http://www.hairstylesdesign.com/>

<http://hairstyles.free-beauty-tips.com/>

## **Make-up**

*“A woman who doesn’t wear lipstick feels undressed in public. Unless she works on a farm.” Max Factor, TIME (June 16, 1958)*

Many women who don’t wear make up simply don’t know just how easy it is to apply. There’s a common misconception that make up takes too long to put on. More and more make up artists are pushing the concept of the “Five Minute Face” to battle those who use lack of time as an excuse. Who hasn’t got five minutes in the morning? If you don’t, maybe you should get up five minutes earlier or plan your morning routine more efficiently.

**1 minute**-Wash and dry your face, apply moisturizer and/or sunscreen.

**1.5 minutes**-The first step is to even out your skin tone. Using your fingers, apply a light foundation for an even canvass. (BB creams are popular now too) Make sure to cover flushed cheeks, blemishes, or dark spots from sun exposure. Do not cake the foundation on. You are looking to achieve a translucent, soft look. To cover baggage under the eyes, dab on a spot of concealer and blend.

For a light look, try a spray foundation or even a tinted moisturizer (killing two birds with one stone!) Liquid foundations from a tube are better. Sponges are nests for bacteria that you can continually transfer from the face to the palette.

**30 seconds**-Apply a light shadow to the lids and right up under the arch of your eyebrow. Use a darker tone in the crease of your eyelid to emphasize depth and dimension. Using an angled brush put the darkest shade into the line of your eyelashes on both the top and bottom. Use colours that are natural to your skin tone. Do not try to match your clothing with your eye shadow. Choose

colours that will make your eye colour stand out. For example, for green eyes, browns and mauves will make the green stand out.

**30 seconds-**Apply a light coat of black or brown mascara to top and bottom lashes. Mascara has a shelf life of 6 months. Every time you use your mascara brush, you are transferring bacteria in and out of the tube so be sure to replace it frequently.

**30 seconds-**Bring colour back into the cheeks with a soft but pinkish tone for a little flush. Apply the colour lightly to the apples of the cheeks and sweep it towards your temples. Create a natural look by blending the colour.

**1 minute-**Choose one feature to focus on. If you have played up your eyes, choose a soft lip colour that does not command attention. If you want to play up your lips, apply a layer of lip wax to help the colour stay and smooth on a fun but elegant tone. Try to stay away from gothic tones that will darken your face and again, don't try to match your lipstick to your shoes but go with something that suits your natural tones.

**Fun fact:** The first recorded evidence of lipstick use dates back to the Sumerian city of Ur, 2000 B.C. (taken from [www.lipstickconspiracy.com](http://www.lipstickconspiracy.com))

### **Teeth/smile**

Oral hygiene is extremely important! First impressions really do count and bad breath will have people backing away from you or offering you gum or a Tic Tac. (How's that for subtlety?) There have never been easier ways to achieve a million dollar smile on a budget. Apparently Crest White Strips give you "a whiter, brighter smile in just 14 days!"

If you think you're ready for some style in your smile, make an appointment with your dentist and oral hygienist for a check up and cleaning. Ask them to recommend do-it-yourself teeth whitening products, toothpastes and toothbrushes that would be right for you.

According to USA Today, 1 in 5 wearers of braces are adults so it's never too late ([http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2006-10-15-braces\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2006-10-15-braces_x.htm)).

Surprisingly, you can tell a lot from a person's smile. Is the smile sincere or forced? Real or fake? Open or closed? Simply from these questions a person could be sincere, real and open or forced, fake and a closed book! Make sure you give a genuine smile that will welcome others and command their attention in a positive light.



## **Accessories**

Accessories done right add punch to an outfit; accessories done wrong are like a slap in the face. Your accessories should enhance the overall picture. Like most elements of your look, your accessories should “go” with your outfit, but they do not necessarily have to match. Experiment with complimentary colours and textures to add depth and dimension to your outfits. Try not to look too busy (multiple patterns or many colours) because people do pay attention to detail especially when they are in your presence for a while.

Spend some time and money accessorizing and personalizing your look. When accessorizing, think about the following:

- Does this piece/item reflect who you really are? For example, wearing a brooch or scarf that is completely out of character does not add anything positive look to your sense of style- in fact the piece becomes a distraction and detraction.
- You have two choices when picking out your accessories. You can choose to be a “Waterford” or a “Bic”. For example, hold up two pens, one clear plastic and one good to high quality designer pen. Which pen says professional and which pen says “I could not be bothered”?
- Keep away from trends that make you look like you are in costume. Going to work is about doing the work and how you dress should reflect the job you do not the character you want to play.

## **No Scents or No Sense?**

Wearing too much perfume or antiperspirant can be very unattractive. An overpowering scent can often give the sense that you may be overcompensating for something. Less is more when it comes to fragrances so avoid mixing and try not to get carried away. More and more people are becoming sensitive to scents even leading to breathing difficulties. Be considerate of others in the work environment and be aware of how you smell. On the other end of the spectrum, body odour can be very unpleasant for others around you. Be aware of this possibility and make sure you shower regularly and do your laundry frequently.

## ***POISED FOR PROFESSIONALISM- General Dress Guidelines for Women***

- A suit with squared shoulders suggests authority but shoulders should only extend one inch beyond your natural shoulder. Unless you have a very narrow frame, shoulder pads are not necessary.

## Professional Dress for Women

- Check that your garments are properly hemmed, free of stains and properly ironed.
- Check for loose buttons and buttons in place.
- Classic business length for skirts is 2 inches above the knee but you should choose a skirt length that flatters your leg. (Short legs-shorter skirt, long legs-longer skirts) Match color of hose to color of shoes and belt.
- Unnatural colors of hose or tights (turquoise blue, green, and burgundy) are not appropriate for business wear.
- Light- weight wool, wool blends, or gabardine and rayon blends are best for all-season suits. They are lightweight and don't wrinkle easily.
- Classic pumps are most appropriate for work. Slip on shoes or sandals are not considered professional.
- When choosing jewelry, less is more and it's better to go with metals than plastics or other materials. Avoid dangling earrings and wear broaches on your lapel, not on your jacket.
- Try to avoid sheer fabrics for garments, especially blouses and always wear neutral colored undergarments.
- Do not carry a briefcase and a handbag. Wallets should fit nicely into your briefcase.
- One common mistake women make when dressing for business is wearing clothes that are too tight. If you gain weight, have your clothing tailored appropriately rather than squeeze into garments.

Today, a bottle of Chanel No.5 is sold every 30 seconds (taken from [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org))

**If you would like an expanded version of this brief, please visit [www.etiquettetrainingtoolkits.com](http://www.etiquettetrainingtoolkits.com) where you can purchase this and 140+ additional civility and etiquette lessons and other materials.**