

The New Rules on Dressing for Success

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MoneyWatch

I have a number of super-successful Silicon Valley clients who dress in ripped denim, Vans shoes and t-shirts. They are worth hundreds of millions, even more, but it's a status symbol to dress like you're homeless to attend board meetings. Conversely, I have worked with trash-hauling company executives who dress in suits and ties every day of the week. And this contrast shows the dramatic shift that has occurred in business attire in recent years, as each industry has developed its own rules.

So how do you learn the rules? Back in the early 1990s, as a young exec, I read *Dress for Success* by John T. Molloy. It gave me a clear understanding of how to dress to impress. But the "business casual" dress movement has turned all of that book's ideas into quaint nostalgia. But fair or not, dress still has an impact on how you're seen. For sales people, especially, first impressions matter.

My daughters will confirm that I am not a fashion plate, but I do have some simple rules for successful dressing if you are in sales.

Know your prospect's uniform.

Before you meet with a prospect, you should know that company's dress code. "Business casual" has a lot of meanings. Call the front desk at the company and ask what the company's dress code is and what the men and women wear. Or ask your contact. The point is, part of your responsibility is to understand that company's culture, including its dress code. Ask for examples, especially of the senior most person who will be in your meeting.

Dress one step up.

If your prospect is in denim, you wear khaki. They wear sport coats without ties; you are in suits without ties. The point is that you always dress one step further up the clothing ladder than your prospect, but *not* two. One step says that you respect and value them. Two steps can send a loaded message.

It's not just what you wear – but how you wear it.

Polished shoes, pressed shirts and well-fitted pants always. At this point, some of you are thinking, "Does he really have to say this to people?" while others are saying, "Why do I have to tuck in my shirt?" But when your clothes are pressed, buttoned down and well-fitted, you convey that you are a person who pays attention to the details and are professional

Grooming trumps style.

Even if you're wearing a great suit, if you've got a terrible haircut, you'll give a bad impression. As crazy as it sounds, everything on the grooming punch lists – fingernails, facial hair, haircuts and oral hygiene – matter.

Know your company's uniform.

One of my clients makes sure that when his sales reps are making their sales calls, they wear a very specific uniform. (His company's clients accept this because they see it as an extension of the brand; the company sells safety products.) It doesn't matter if the reps are presenting in a board room or on a manufacturing plant floor, they wear the same simple uniform. Obviously, if you work at this company, you follow this dress code in order to fit in.

Remember, you can dress in a way where your attire is the only message people remember, or you can dress in a way that takes nothing away from the message

* <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-new-rules-on-dressing-for-success/>
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