

Dressing: Pass or fail?

Put it all together for a polished, professional you

By VALERIA LEMKE
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All heads turned as she walked into the new business meeting. She was the essence of professionalism.

Hair beautifully coifed. Conservative gold jewelry. Well-tailored beige gabardine skirt suit and ivory shawl-collared blouse. And a tuft of green shag carpeting on her left calf — caught underneath her silky pantyhose.

No one noticed the classic black leather pumps.

"Like a speaker who has a spinach leaf caught in his teeth, there are things you can't get by no matter how hard you try," says Clinton Greenleaf III, author of "Attention to Detail: A Gentleman's Guide to Professional Appearance and Conduct."

In dressing for success, "the whole goal is to get people to stop looking at your appearance and get them to listen to you. It's a pass-fail test," he says.

His solution to the spinach and the carpet: "Make a daily investment of two to three minutes checking yourself out. Look in the mirror before leaving for work. Are both collar tabs buttoned? Is there a coffee stain on your trousers? Are your socks mismatched?"

Greenleaf, who frankly admits he isn't ready to advise women on dress, is firm in his recommendations for men entering the office environment. Here's his recipe for the well-dressed man:

- A dark suit. Forget jackets and slacks. "A blue blazer and khakis just doesn't do it anymore."

- Dark shoes, polished and in good repair.

- Conservative tie in a full Windsor knot. "If you don't know how to tie a full Windsor, talk to a member of the military."

- Dress shirts and white tees for underneath. "Have a dozen dress shirts and send them to the laundry. It will cost you \$1 to \$1.50 apiece and is very worth the investment."

Complete your look divested of earrings or nose rings, clean shaven or with neatly trimmed facial hair and standing up straight, he said. "Dress up a sloucher in the nicest clothes and he'll look sloppy."

You can get your complete office wardrobe for just under \$1,000, according to Greenleaf. "That includes two suits at \$200 each and two pairs of shoes at \$100 each."

Marcille D. Hughes, regional director for Nordstrom Personal Touch in Los Angeles, did better than that for a female patron recently. She created a complete wardrobe for \$750 during an anniversary sale.

"The client went home with a three-piece black suit (jacket, skirt, pants), a three-piece chocolate suit, a black and chocolate Glen plaid jacket and pants, blouses and even some earrings," Hughes said.

The mix-and-match combinations added up to a phenomenal 22 office outfits.

Hughes likens building a wardrobe to buying a home. First, you need to build a core wardrobe — much like the basic structure of a house. Decorate that core with a color scheme and put your money into things you want to last a long time, she said.

For women, her list of essential items in dressing for the office includes:

- Basic black or navy three-piece suit.

- Novelty jacket.

- Novelty pants.

- Blouses.

- Scarves.

- "Pops of color" — dramatic items such as a red suit.

- Shoes and handbag in the core color.

This will get you started, Hughes said. Build from there, buying pieces that work with your existing inventory as budget allows.

So often "women have tons of clothes and nothing to wear, because they aren't true to their core wardrobe," she said. "Maximizing means things interrelate."



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Experts advise men in today's corporate world to dress conservatively, pay attention to details and to stand up straight to make the most professional impression. 'Dress for the position you want, not the one you have,' consultants add.

Southern Californian Carlolann Peterson, founder of Companies United Against Domestic Violence, has called upon Personal Touch shopper, Hollie Strool, first to upgrade her wardrobe to a more professional look, and since, to fill in items as needed.

Mary Lou Andre, who owns Dressing Well, a national wardrobe management and fashion consulting firm in Atlanta, concurs with the need for both physical and psychological comfort. If your clothes are not right, "you'll feel off," she said.

Andre — who also offers advice through her Web site, www.dressingwell.com, has some basic guidelines for pulling it all together.

"Start in the closet," she said. "Get rid of things you don't wear. You want to start

each day seeing clothes that make you look and feel good."

Dressing for success has been redefined in the past several years, she added. "Casual is here to stay. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't be attentive to details. Don't confuse casual with sloppy."

For the woman just entering the office setting, Andre agrees with Hughes on the bare necessities. Then you build as you go — a twin sweater set or vest will change your look, she said.

"Err on the conservative side, especially when starting out," she added. "Don't dress too young, too funky or too sexy. Set yourself up to win."

A final tip, echoed by both Andre and Hughes, "Dress for the position you want, not the one you have."