

DRESSING FOR CLOUT, CONFIDENCE AND CREDIBILITY

By Karen Brunger

“Nothing succeeds like the appearance of success.” -- Richard Feynman

You've scheduled the meeting. You've done your research and prepared for the meeting. You've mapped out all the right tactics and strategies for the meeting. Now for the big question: What do you *wear* to the meeting?

It's time to don your shining armour – or, at any rate, its modern-day equivalent for the business “battlefield.” Any soldier who does not take the time to plan and choose her “uniform” with care and consideration can sabotage herself on the field of battle!

Think about it. You've worked so hard, and so long, to set yourself up for success at this meeting. Doesn't it make sense to invest just a little more time so you can make the right wardrobe choices? *Failing* to invest that time really can cost you the deal!

Four Levels of Business Dress

There are four levels of dress for business, each relatively easy to spot:

Level One: Formal Corporate

Level Two: Business

Level Three: Business Casual

Level Four: Casual Business

As a matter of strategy, I strongly recommend that you choose Formal Corporate for the first meeting with any prospective client. As a salesperson, you generally cannot make a mistake by dressing a level or two above the style of the prospect ... but you certainly can lose the deal by dressing a level or two *below* the prospect. Let's look more closely, then, at Level One, which is what I would suggest for all initial meetings – and for all high-level meetings, as well. At Level One your image has absolute power, authority, and credibility. This look is appropriate for any situation where a high level of trust, reliability, and stability is required.

The Suit

A sharp-looking suit is the easiest and most effective way to portray power and authority in Level One. The most formal corporate suit is dark, cold and neutral – which means navy blue or charcoal. Black may seem like a safe choice, but can present problems, as it can look like an evening suit.

The suit should be made of very fine wool; I usually look for wool that's rated at least 'Super 100.'(The number indicates the number of fibres per inch.) 'Super 120' looks even more elegant and refined. Invest in the best quality suit you can afford. I usually recommend that

your best suit cost 1% of your gross annual income.

The most formal suit is solid in color, but a pinstripe pattern is also acceptable at this level. Beware: The more obvious the pattern, the less professional the image.

The style of the suit is classic and tailored. For women, a skirt is more formal than trousers; should be pencil-straight and knee-length. The lines should be straight, sharp, and severe.

The Shirt

The higher the contrast between the shirt and the suit, the more professional and formal the effect. A white shirt is the most formal. I suggest choosing a shade that complements your personal colouring, perhaps ice white, soft white, ivory, or cream.

Guidelines for men: choose shirts in fine cotton; any topstitching should be close to the edge, and should have a refined look.

Guidelines for women: you face more of a challenge in getting the right top to wear under a suit. While a man has a tie to fill in the collar, you don't have this option. If you choose a collared shirt, you need to make sure that the collar of the top does not conflict with the collar of the jacket. You could also choose a high-neck shell. Keep in mind that the lower your neckline, the less professional your impression. It never ceases to amaze me how often corporate women who are trying for Level One show off their cleavage. This is not where you want to go.

The Tie (Men Only)

The most formal colours for a tie are variations of gray, blue, gold, and red. The best formal patterns include solid, repeating diagonal lines, foulard (a repeating geometric pattern), and pin-dot.

Pay attention to your tie length! For a conservative image, the tip of your tie would come to the top of your belt buckle. If you require a more creative, progressive image, the tip of your tie could come ¼ inch *below* your belt buckle.

Use a tie-knot in proportion to your build. If you have a narrow face or a slimmer build, you could use a 4-in-hand. If your face and build is more average, you could use the Half-Windsor. If you have more fullness in your face and build, you could use the Full Windsor. If any of this sounds unfamiliar, check out this web site: www.tie-a-tie.net

The Pocket Square (Men Only)

A white linen pocket square is the most formal choice. If you want to show some flair and creativity, you can go with coloured silk. The pocket square should match colour in the shirt or tie.

The way the pocket square is folded can make a big difference. The most formal folds are "straight," "triangle," and "petal." (The 'puff' and 'casual' are best reserved for less formal situations.) Confused? Take a look at www.wikihow.com/Fold-a-Pocket-Square

Shoes

Make sure your shoes are immaculate and in good condition. They should be made of leather, and reflect a classic, yet updated, style.

Guidelines for men: an Oxford (lace-up) shoe sends the most formal message; it should look refined and elegant rather than rustic and chunky. Black shoes are safest for projecting the formal corporate image.

Guidelines for women: A pump – closed toe and heel – with a medium height heel is the most formal choice. Important: The shoe should match or be darker than your hemline!

The Belt

The belt should match the shoes. A good corporate belt is made of smooth leather, and features a classic (as in “not distracting”) buckle. Men: If you wear suspenders, a belt is not necessary.

Hosiery

Guidelines for men: Match your socks to your trousers. It’s not a faux pas to match the shoes, but it’s not the best image. Executive length socks - which cover the calves – ensure we won’t see your hairy leg when you sit and cross your legs.

Guidelines for women: Wear sheer hose to match your skin colour.

Jewellery

The jewellery with the strongest professional image is made of gold (yellow or white) or platinum. Jewellery should be moderate in size, classic, and simple. Both men and women may wear a watch, and may wear one ring per hand. Men may wear a tie clip and collar pin. Women may wear stud earrings.

The Briefcase

The narrower your briefcase, the higher your perceived status. Choose good quality leather. Women should not carry a handbag and briefcase at the same time.

The Pen

When you pull out your pen, it *must not* be an 89-cent plastic ballpoint! The pen doesn't have to be extremely expensive (although that certainly doesn't hurt) but it should look elegant. The pen must be made of metal.

Eyewear

Wire frames are professional-looking, whereas plastic frames tend to look sporty or casual. Use non-reflective and non-tinted lenses. Make sure your eyewear is updated, and gives you the competitive edge in terms of appearance. The eyewear you choose can make you look

outdated and passé ... or credible and savvy.

Hair

For both sexes, formal hair styles are sleek and controlled. Hair that touches the shoulder projects a more casual image. For women; as a general rule, slightly shorter is best for Level One. Go to a reputable hair stylist on a regular basis; you want your hair style to be current and flattering. Of course, your hair should be neat, clean and in good condition.

Guidelines for women: If you colour your hair, bear in mind that natural colours are going to be perceived as more credible than unnatural colours. Leave the fuchsia hair for your personal time. Make sure your hair colour harmonizes with your natural colouring. You will send a conflicting message if your hair is warm and your natural skin and eyes are cool. If you have not had a personal colour analysis with a professional, you may want to consider this before investing in a change in hair colour.

Guidelines for men: It's generally best if you're clean-shaven, as facial hair can sabotage you. (Come to think of it, this advice applies to women as well. Women who have reached menopausal years often need to watch for hair coming out of the chin.) If there is obvious hair in places that could be distracting – such as the nose and ears – this should be clipped. I sometimes see men who have a beautiful short haircut, but who also have tufts of hair climbing up out of the back of the shirt and onto the neck. Ugh.

Makeup

Men should not wear makeup.

For women, the general rule is that all makeup should be neutral in tone and natural-looking. There is, however, an important exception to this rule: Women who wear red lipstick get listened to more than women who wear any other colour. Of course, you must make sure that the shade of red you choose – whether it's cherry red, soft red, scarlet, or brick – harmonizes with and complements your natural colouring.

I recommend that women have a makeup lesson once a year to keep their look fresh and updated.

Nails

Having a manicure every week can keep your nails attractive and in good condition. (A pedicure once a month is also a good idea.) You don't want hangnails, broken nails, ragged cuticles, or chipped polish. For a formal corporate look, a clear polish or French manicure is appropriate for women.

Teeth

A nice white smile says 'success.' A consultation with a cosmetic dentist can help you decide whether there is work to be done.

Cleaning your teeth on a regular basis helps keep your teeth healthy and your breath fresh.

Here are my top five tips to assist with fresh breath, which is an absolute must in any professional setting such as a sales meeting:

- Drink water with lemon – the lemon helps kill bacteria.
- Eat dark green leafy food, such as parsley.
- Eat crispy food such as celery and carrot sticks. (They act as an abrasive on the gums.)
- Avoid dairy foods before the meeting.
- Use an oral breath strip.

Grooming and Hygiene

Shower and use a deodorant. Avoid fragrance in business, as it can be distracting, unprofessional, and inconsiderate. Many people are allergic to fragrance.

Once You Have Left A Great First Impression on the First Meeting ...

... You may choose to adopt one of the other levels of professional business dress. Here's a brief summary.

Level Two: Business. This look is appropriate for general business, or where some creativity or individuality is desired. There is flexibility in styles, colours, and patterns of the suit, shirt, and tie.

Level Three: Business Casual. This look may work if your meeting is at a sporting event. A jacket is still worn, but it's not part of a matched suit. Shoes are more casual – a loafer or walking shoe.

Level Four: Casual Business. This is an extremely casual look for business. It is 'sans jacket' – just a shirt and trousers or (for women) an appropriate top and skirt.

Putting It All Together

"Who you are speaks so loudly I can't hear what you say." --Ralph Waldo Emerson

Your image speaks powerfully for you – or against you -- before you even open your mouth! Consider the following true story.

Paul's Story

As the president and owner of a business specializing in information technology, Paul sells his products to presidents of Fortune 500 companies. One CEO told Paul that he should see an image consultant, as he was sabotaging his business. Paul became my client.

As a "technology person," Paul had not factored his own image into the product promotion equation. As a result, his image was uncoordinated, unprofessional and unflattering. His clothes were "matched" with no consideration for colour, fabric or appropriateness.

Working together, we quickly discarded about 95% of his wardrobe, then introduced clothes that would allow him to be comfortable, appropriate and credible, not only for his important meetings, but for all facets of his life. The colours, fabrics and styles we chose suited his body type, colouring and personality.

A month after I completed my work with Paul, I received a telephone call from him. He was almost speechless, he was so overcome with emotion. He said, "I can't begin to tell you the difference that this has made in my life." He reported that his income had tripled, and members of his staff were now treating him with much more respect. As if that weren't enough, women were approaching him socially!

Once you make the choices that allow your image to enhance your professional success, great things really do begin to happen!

ABOUT KAREN BRUNGER

Karen Brunger is Director of the International Image Institute Inc., and International Past-President of the Association of Image Consultants International. Karen is a Certified Image Professional and a recipient of the international Award of Excellence in Image Consulting.

An international trainer, Karen has presented on five continents, and her image systems and products are currently used in over 60 countries. Karen is a co-author of Executive Image Power, and is a contributing writer to B Magazine. Karen also appears regularly as a guest expert in the media.

With over twenty-five years as an image consultant, Karen has facilitated the optimal development of over two thousand individuals on appearance, behaviour and communications to ensure they achieve more of their own potential.

PRAISE FOR KAREN BRUNGER

"Thank you for the truly inspiring wealth of information you shared with us at the AICI conference in Singapore. What a great impact your workshop had on me. I loved every minute of it." ~ Kimberley Bux

"Thank you again for the incredible training...I return home with clarity, focus, and a heightened enthusiasm and energy. Also in my toolbox a concrete plan of where and how to get started. I believe all of this is a total result of your excellent training." ~ Katherine Hess – Calgary

"Karen is warm, authentic and powerful. She empowers me to be me." ~ Lois Ferguson, President, Malibu Consulting International – Toronto, Ontario

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