

What You Say Before You Speak, Part I

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The success of any personal encounter begins the second someone lays eyes on you ... often long before either of you speaks. A professional image – appearance and behavior – helps start the experience in the right vein since people decide 10 things about you within 10 seconds of seeing you.

The business casual look that really took hold in the 1990s workplace has made it more difficult to look as professional and powerful as before B.C. While some laud the trend, others think it shows less respect for self and others.

**Dress for the occasion.
If the occasion is business,
Then dress as if you mean business.**

Women frequently suffer more negative career consequences from business casual dress than men because they have far more choices. Women often choose leggings, stirrup pants, mini skirts and skorts. For men, casual typically means pants and a shirt or sweater. Their biggest fault may be to choose jeans or sweat pants or muscle T-shirts.

Learning the art of impression management – planning how you look and how you act to get a certain reaction – is sure to impact your career or business more favorably!

You tell others how to treat you. Your business associates and coworkers mirror whether you want to be treated as Number One or Number Ten in your area of expertise and how much respect you want.

How You Do It - Appearance-wise

Color, style and fit provide the *one, two, three punch* in your appearance arena. Color affects people physically and psychologically, and business casual doesn't change that. Dark colors – black, navy and darker shades of gray – psychologically connote power, authority, knowledge, responsibility, and success. Brown shows that you are dependable and stable – however you lack power and authority. White is a good choice for a blouse or shirt since it connotes clean, formal and sophisticated. Pastels denote softness and femininity. Every color has a message of its own. How you put them together sends your message.

Style: Here again business casual takes its toll, if it's power and professionalism you want to convey. A suit coat with long sleeves, slightly padded shoulders and a collar make you appear one-third more powerful. (You sales will come easier when you know when to take your suit jacket off in a sales call *and when to put it back on!*)

Shoulder pads add authority. Pleats and darts add bulks. Vertical lines formed by classic three-button jackets contribute to the illusion of heights, as do pin stripes. Single-breasted jackets with a center vent are best for men and women of average height. Double-breasted jackets complement taller people.

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Fit: Few people have “hanger figures.” Almost all of you need help to make your clothes look as if they were made for you. Many stores offer free tailoring. If not, find a neighborhood tailor who can do wonders with a nip here and tuck there. Take the shoes and any other items you will wear with the garment so your tailor can work with the real thing.

Knowing that you have chosen the right color, style and fit for the occasion will give you increased self-confidence and add immeasurably to your presentation ... of yourself and your products and services.

What Your Appearance Reveals

What you wear reveals eight things about you.

- **Self-esteem** – How you dress is your love of self made tangible to the world. When you wear ill-fitting, soiled, torn, tattered clothing, it can make others aware of a poor sense of self-worth. What people see on the outside lets them know you feel about yourself on the inside. Image is the tip of the iceberg, yet it adds immeasurably to helping people understand what’s going on inside you.
- **Self-respect** – How you wear it and what you choose to wear show others how much you respect yourself. Few people come even close to naturally having a “perfect” shape or size. Those who respect themselves know how to dress to emphasize strengths and minimize body flaws. Respect for self is lacking in women who in the workplace wear skirts that are too short, necklines that are too low, pants that are too tight; for men who wear long pants that are too “short,” ties with spots, jeans with holes; and with anyone who gains weight and then wears clothes that used to fit. Self-respect plays a big part in knowing/wearing the acceptable thing socially and professionally.
- **Confidence** – The way you carry yourself contributes greatly to the air of confidence others perceive. What you wear also contributes to that look of confidence. When I wear a hat, inevitably men and women will say to me they love the confidence I portray. Some women say they would love to wear hats but are afraid they can’t carry it off. Men and women both say how it completes a woman’s outfit. Your goal is to create an aura of confidence and assuredness when you walk into a room. Make sure your clothing contributes its part!
- **Organizational skills** – Even people who don’t like to file or plan the details of an event need to appear organized in their clothing color and style choices. You want to create a unified look from head to foot, without calling attention to any one item or color. Frequently in my “Polishing Your Professional Presence” workshops, I will ask attendees up front to describe what they think our time together will be like ... knowing they have been sizing me up, even though I have only said a few words.

I remember the man who said, “organized, because everything from your suit to your blouse to your shoes to your hose to your jewelry is coordinated

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and looks as if it came together.”

Recruiters tell me they use appearance to judge organizational skills. If they know where the potential employee parked, they may send someone to walk around the car to see if it looks clean and orderly ... or if it resembles the refuse bin for a fast-food restaurant or the repository for a week's clothing that needs to be taken to the cleaners.

- **Soundness of judgment** – Knowing and wearing the right outfit for the right occasion is an important indicator of whether you can make the right decisions at work, too. When I owned a business leads group and held after-hour events, most of the attendees wore suits or business casual wear. The member who owned a singles dating service and came attired in black velvet slacks, a rhinestone-studded strapless top and a black shawl turned more than one eye! She may have been dressed appropriately for one of her events, but not for a business event. She made a statement, and judging by all the comments I received, I doubt it was the one she wanted to make. Know when to wear a suit, business casual or formal attire to blend in appropriately.
- **Attention to detail** – About 90 percent of your body is clothed in business – the remaining 10 percent of your impression is made through your grooming and includes manicured nails, trimmed mustache and beard, lack of a 5 o'clock shadow, neat and attractive hair style and the right amount of makeup and jewelry that can be seen and not heard.
- **Creativity** - While some jobs allow more creative expression than others, all of them permit you to individualize at least a bit. Express your uniqueness through a special tie and matching hankie, a scarf or a special or exquisite piece of jewelry. Maybe your mark will become the special way you tie a scarf or how you find just the right one to complement or coordinate with your suit and blouse ... or maybe a pair of cuff links that looks expensive yet apropos for your important meeting.
- **Reliability** – The sum of the above adds up to how reliable you are ... from the big picture to the details. Can you be counted on to look and behave in a professional manner wherever your job takes you?

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Lillian D. Bjorseth is known nationally for her infectious enthusiasm and her practical, insightful and pertinent content that you can apply on the spot and throughout your life. Lillian's a people-skills speaker, trainer, skills coach and author of *Breakthrough Networking: Building Relationships That Last, 52 Ways to Break the Ice & Target Your Market* and the *Nothing Happens Until We Communicate* CD and workbook series. She's a top graduate of the prestigious University of Missouri School of Journalism, and a member of National Speakers Association. Her Fortune 100 experience includes more than 10 years at AT&T where she trained top executives in media and communication skills. Contact her at lillianspeaks@duoforce.com, www.duoforce.com, or 630-983-5308.

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