



Businesswomen's Fashion



Professional Style That Speaks for You – Without the Power Suit

By **Connie Myers**

When it comes to dressing for the office, we live in confusing times. Casual Friday has migrated to fill much of the workweek. And women are faced with a myriad of choices: pants, pantsuits, skirts, dresses or the 80s power suit.

"Women have it hard," says style expert Rachel Weingarten, president of GTK Marketing Group in New York and author of the newly-released book "Career and Corporate Cool." "There's no one way to dress. Every industry is different."

Never fear, help is here.

What Not to Wear

Where do women look for an example of appropriate business attire? Professional women on television seem to wear suit jackets over lingerie, which might not go over well at the typical accounting office. "For anybody who looks at television as their guide on what to wear career-wise, I will ask: Do these women look like anybody you know? No. These are actresses," Weingarten says. She lists the plastic surgery, hair extensions, sexy clothes and professional makeup that are a part of the make-believe television world. "That's not reality," she says.

Magazines are not much better. "When you pick up a fashion magazine, it's insane-looking. You would never wear your hair like that. When you look at the runway and see people wearing an \$80,000 gold couture dress, you would never wear that," Weingarten says.

But television and magazines can serve a purpose in your wardrobe planning, Weingarten says. Look for overall style trends such as the length of the jacket and the height of the heels. Add a metallic gold accent to your outfit with jewelry or shoes. "Use it to update your style a little bit," she says.

Finding What Fits

So what should you wear to the office? "You can never go wrong with wardrobe basics," Weingarten says. In "Career and Corporate Cool," Weingarten recommends beginning your wardrobe with knee-length pencil skirts and flat-front, boot-cut trousers. Pair these with classic button-front shirts and fitted blazers. Black shoes and classic jewelry will complete any outfit.

With every choice, consider color, fabric and cut.

If you wear a sweater, go with cashmere. Select basic pieces in black, charcoal, navy, white and camel; complement the basics with colors that look great with your hair and skin tones.

Most importantly, choose what fits your shape and style. "I always choose what looks good on me, what suits my shape," Weingarten says. "I am never going to put something on, ever, that doesn't look good on me. I cannot do my job if I'm too self-conscious."

Roberta Hughes, founder and president of Avidere, a Salt Lake City-based image and fashion consulting group for men and women, agrees with Weingarten on the importance of a great fit. "Wear garments that fit and flatter your shape," says Hughes. "The right fit can make all the difference in feeling self-conscious or self-confident. Impeccable style is always an intelligent choice."

Suiting Up

Twenty years ago, professional women often wore power suits with big shoulder pads and a small neck scarf mimicking a man's tie. Fortunately, the era of the power suit is just about over. "The reason people like suits is it gives them one thing less to worry about: I'm wearing a suit, I look fine," Weingarten says. "I don't think that women in business have to stick to suits at all."

In some business environments, only a suit will do. But even if you're a corporate lawyer, you can still be feminine. "You can taper the waist a little bit, or have an interesting neckline, or add little accents," Weingarten says. "It's good to wear the basics. But you should integrate your own style into that."

Be sure to choose shoes to match the message of your clothing, Weingarten says. "I do think it's ludicrous to see stiletto heels with a power suit," she says. "I'm not saying wear sensible shoes or ugly shoes — I'm saying take into account the message you're giving people when you meet them. You don't want an air of frivolity about you."

Style and Comfort

If that designer jacket is too snug across the shoulders, you'll never be comfortable in it, no matter how beautiful the fabric. Ditto if the shirt is too low, the skirt is too short, or the pants too tight.

But comfort goes beyond fit. "Comfort doesn't just mean that your feet don't hurt," Weingarten says. "Comfort means that you're wearing something that suits you. Women want comfort and style. You don't want to look inappropriate but you also want to have your own style."

Choose a signature color to brighten your basics. Find a little black dress for business dinners. Buy some great boots to dress up your weekend wear. Be professional, but have some fun with your fashion. ●

Five Professional Image Tips

Source: Avidere (avidereimage.com)

Your image is always speaking even when you're not. Increase your personal presence and power by following these image tips:

Choose the Right Color

Dark or neutral colors such as brown or navy are considered "power" colors, appear more professional and are slimming on all figure types. Bright or light pastel colors are perceived as more playful. For a professional look, wear dark or neutral colors predominantly and bright or light colors sparingly. Wear your personal colors (those that mirror your eyes, hair and skin coloring) near your face for an attractive and powerful image.

Find a Good Fit

Wear garments that fit and flatter your shape. Clothing worn too tight or loose visually adds pounds to any figure and looks unkempt and unprofessional. Invest in styles that fit correctly or have them altered to do so. Avoid wearing revealing clothing at the office. If you want to be taken seriously, the mind, not the body should be on point.

Be Style Savvy

The clothing styles you wear communicate a great deal about your personality and career goals. For instance, jackets with lapels are considered more serious than those without. A button-down top with a v-neckline displays more authority than a crewneck t-shirt. Just remember, tailored clothing is perceived more professional than untailored clothing. You can combine both styles and maintain a professional image if the tailored look is more dominant. For instance, wear a jacket with a silk crewneck blouse. Above all, wear styles that make you feel more confident and others will treat you accordingly.

All In the Details

Grooming is an essential part of your professional image. Just remember moderation when it comes to the basics. Extreme make-up, hair color weaves, excessive or loud jewelry, strong perfume or bright nail polish is inappropriate for work and should be avoided. Select accessories and hairstyles that enhance your professional image not detract from it.

Be Authentic

Express your individuality; exude intelligence and sophistication by skillfully combining unique clothing colors, textures and styles together. There are endless ways to be creative and still maintain a strong, professional image. Just remember to always lead attention up toward your face to maintain eye contact and creditability.