

• **What Not To Wear**

Image consultants offer pointers on how Massachusetts lawyers should dress for the job

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What to wear?

It's a question that plagues most of us with some regularity — if not daily.

But the clothing dilemma can be especially challenging for lawyers, who do their business in a myriad of settings, whether it be a home office; downtown courtroom; large, formal law firm; or laid-back, small-firm environment.

And as varied as the settings in which attorneys practice are the clients that they serve.

Add to the mix today's professional environment where Friday means blue jeans and "business casual" has taken on a life of its own, and it's little wonder that when it comes to what is acceptable, professional attire these days, lawyers have more questions than answers.

Professional style and image consultants warn that what may have been acceptable in better economic times may not be as appropriate in the current environment.

"When the economy was doing well, people were more relaxed as far as the perks that companies gave employees like dressing down," explains Boston's Evangelia Souris, a certified international image consultant who frequently consults with attorneys.

"But as the economy started being more taxed, we found that people began dressing as if their life depended on it," she notes.

The biggest challenge Souris faces when working with lawyers is convincing them that appearance is important.

She says attorneys are "cerebral types" who often believe the only thing that matters is the quality of the work they do for their clients.

However, the way in which an attorney presents himself is a reflection of his lawyering, according to retired Judge Edward M. Ginsburg.

"I've found over time that the very best lawyers are very professionally attired," he comments.

"There is a relationship between their appearance and the quality of their presentations."

It's all part of the package, says Samantha von Sperling, a social image consultant in Boston who works closely with attorneys.

"If I need a lawyer and they are stuck in the '80s fashion-wise, that tells me they're not on top of things that are happening in the world," she remarks. "My affairs are fluid and if I'm going to give somebody top dollar to handle them, I damn well expect that person to look the part," she adds.

Boston trial attorney Douglas K. Sheff agrees, but cautions against attorneys dressing too flashy or garishly.

"Dressing well doesn't mean fancy or over-the-top. It means tasteful — simple," he says, adding that he is a chameleon when it comes to dressing for the occasion.

"If I'm with a client at a construction site who is more comfortable with me in jeans, then I'll wear jeans. But if I'm in court, I wear a suit and tie — but not necessarily my snazziest suit. I don't want the attention to be on my clothes but on what I say," Sheff explains.

Ginsburg concurs.

“For court, wear conservative attire that does not detract from what you’re trying to say,” he advises.

But Ginsburg also points out that a person’s dress is one of the greatest forms of non-verbal communication.

“What people wear — whether it’s lawyers or witnesses or parties [to a lawsuit] — is very important because you are communicating with the judge by what you have on before you’ve even opened your mouth,” he observes.

Souris adds that “if you remember someone for what he wore, it could be because it didn’t work.” And first impressions are formed within seven to 30 seconds of meeting a person, she says.

Being properly attired will go a long way toward leaving a positive first impression, even if you fumble over the conversation that follows an introduction to a potential new client or stumble on your words in an opening statement.

Following are some helpful hints for both men and women who want their savvy and smart images to match their savvy and smart minds.

For the men

Quality, natural fabrics are the key to looking sharp, says Souris.

“A lot of men get lazy and buy shirts that have polyester in them. This is not a good look,” insists Souris, who claims that men can buy a nicer natural fiber shirt at Filene’s Basement for the same or less money than they’d spend on a polyester blend at a regular department store.

“A suit can look polished and expensive, but you can be wearing cashmere-silk pants and an Egyptian cotton shirt of the best quality and still look like a million,” Souris says.

It’s this non-suit business-casual look that attorneys most often hire Souris to help them achieve. The proper business-casual look is best described by explaining what to avoid when dressing down but wanting to look professional.

Some obvious, yet common, fashion faux pas include wearing wrinkled or stained clothing. Another is wearing shoes that are dirty or unpolished.

Von Sperling insists that boat shoes should be saved for boating and men should instead find a high-quality loafer.

A less obvious mistake men make, the experts say, is wearing no socks or socks that are too short.

“The no-socks look is simply unacceptable,” Souris says, “unless you’re working in LA.”

Another sock rule: When men’s pants ride up their ankles, the socks should be long enough so that no leg hair can be seen.

“It’s a big no-no when the hairs are showing,” cautions Souris.

Men also make the business-casual mistake of relying too much on the golf shirt, particularly in the summer months.

Golf and “Polo” shirts, says von Sperling, are simply too casual and sporty for many professional environments.

Men should stick with a simple, yet quality button-down Oxford for a clean business-casual look, say the experts. And in the colder months, a collared light-weight sweater with a sports coat sends a much better message than a bulky ski sweater.

For a professional, yet casual pant, men should seek out a cashmere or cashmere-blend pant that will hold up over time.

The preferred style today is a flat front, which creates a more refined, slimming look, according to Souris. But for a man who carries a few extra pounds around the midsection, a pleated front is

preferable.

And where there are pleats there should be cuffs — at the bottom of the pant, that is.

However, men 5-foot-7 and shorter should avoid pants with cuffs as they will weigh heavily on a smaller-framed man and might make him look even shorter.

There are also rules when it comes to choosing a shirt collar.

Men with oval faces are lucky: They can wear any type of collar, according to Souris.

But men with long, narrow faces (think John Kerry) should wear a “spread” or wider collar, while those with round faces should wear a pointed collar.

Sports jackets and suit coats should hit the knuckle of the thumb when the arm is hanging down loosely.

“If they are too long, the whole body is out of balance,” explains Souris.

One other secret to looking good is choosing color contrasts that work with one’s complexion.

Souris says that the contrast between a shirt and tie or jacket a man chooses to pair should match the contrast between his complexion and his hair.

For example, a man with dark hair and light skin — Carey Grant, for example — looks best in a dark shirt and light jacket, or vice versa, whereas someone with a low contrast between his skin and hair color — think Woody Allen — would do best to wear a jacket and shirt with little color contrast between them.

Souris says that when men dress to match their own color contrast it’s easier for others to stay focused on the man’s face and words instead of being distracted by his clothing.

“But this rule doesn’t apply to women, Souris is careful to point out.

Women have fewer steadfast rules than men to live by when it comes to dressing professionally, experts say.

However there are a handful of dos and don’ts women should always keep in mind when dressing for work.

For the women

There exists in the fashion world and on Wall Street a myth that acceptable skirt lengths for professional women are an economic indicator: the shorter the skirt, the better the economy.

If there’s any truth to that, say fashion experts, female lawyers should be wearing skirts at a more conservative length than in the past.

In other words, the Ally McBeal days are long gone,” says Souris.

Today’s acceptable skirt length measures about an inch-and-a-half above the knee. Skirts that are too long, according to fashion experts, will make a woman look dowdy.

Avoid drapey-type skirts with a lot of pleats or silky flowing skirts, which may not be perceived as professional.

When it comes to blouses, women should avoid wearing spaghetti straps or tank tops at the office unless they are wearing a jacket on top that they plan to keep on other than when they’re in their offices alone.

In fact, von Sperling says women should avoid exposing their full bare arms at the office.

Further, they should steer clear of open-toed shoes, according to fashion experts.

While such advice may be perceived as somewhat conservative, style consultants are quick to point out that New England remains extremely conservative compared to other parts of the country when it comes to fashion.

As one New York fashion publicity director put it: “Boston is not New York.”

New Yorkers, according to the source, can wear pretty much anything they want. “They don’t have to dress for success like they do in Boston,” the publicity director claims.

Plus, the legal profession itself is marked by formality and traditionalism, which is why stylists recommend erring on the conservative side for women attorneys.

“No cleavage. You shouldn’t look sexual. It’s not about sex, unless, of course, you want to get ahead with your sex. That’s a different story,” quips Souris.

“But it’s still acceptable to be feminine,” she adds.

The good news is that if everything else is put together just right, a woman might get away without wearing the dreaded panty hose.

Souris says one of the most frequent comments she receives from female attorneys is that they see women nicely dressed, without pantyhose, and yet they still look professional.

“Everything else has to look immaculate. The skirt is the right length, the blouse is fresh and ironed. Everything else must be balanced to carry that look,” say Souris.

The makeup factor

When it comes to makeup, experts say a little goes a long way.

Gone are the days of wall-to-wall, edge-to-edge foundation.

“Just do the T [zone],” von Sperling suggests, addressing problem areas in the cheeks, nose, chin and forehead.

“It’s a more modern approach to looking at the complexion,” she insists.

And when it comes to eyeliner and mascara, von Sperling says leave below the eye “naked for a fresh daytime look that’s easy to maintain.”

Eyeliner and mascara should only be worn on the bottom of the eye in the evening to avoid having it smear frequently throughout the day while looking down at a computer.

And when it comes to dealing with red eye — not the kind in photos, but the kind that comes from long hours of writing and research — von Sperling claims that navy blue takes the red out. She says a navy blue shadow and mascara will work best to counter red and irritated eyes.

Work it

It’s more than just clothes that make the male — or female — attorney. But one’s attire, like one’s intellect, can be used as a means to achieve professional success.

For example, Sheff plans and adjusts his wardrobe through the life of a trial.

“I always wear a dark suit at the beginning of trial. It’s more serious,” he says. “Then I lighten up, depending on the trial.”

When he wants a jury to focus on the answers of a witness in a direct examination, he wears more muted colors so that the attention lies squarely with the witness. But when Sheff is cross-examining a witness, he might choose to wear brighter colors.

“I want [the jury] to hear the question, not the answer. It’s called ‘anchoring,’” he explains.

And if Sheff has a particularly “bell-ringing day” in court, he’ll make a point of dressing in that same suit for closing arguments to subliminally remind the jury of the day that things went so well.

“[Attorneys] aren’t just writing the script. They’re in the play. They have to face the fact that every edge they can get they need,” says Sheff.

Ginsburg agrees.

“People should think very carefully about what they look like. It sets the tone.”