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Business Casual

Dressing Down with Style

By Anne Sowden, AICI CIP

Believe it or not, the two most dreaded words in the business world today have nothing to do with business, but with what to wear. Those two words are “business casual.”

As we all know, business casual has been around since the 90s, when the business world embraced this new way of dressing. Company dress codes were revised, and everyone thought it was cool to dress more casually for work.

The Challenges of Business Casual

With this new way of dressing came a number of challenges.

- **Knowing what to wear for different business situations.** Before, you put on a suit, and that would carry you through every business situation. Now, you have to think about what you will be doing each day and take the time to plan what to wear.
- **What If.** No matter how much you planned, there was always the possibility of “what if.” What if I get called into an important meeting? What if my biggest client drops in unexpectedly? What if they want to interview me for the evening news?
- **Being Taken Seriously.** This is particularly applicable for women. When women dress down, they lose all power and authority. One client told me that she hated business casual because she didn’t look like a grownup and no one took her seriously.

- **Setting the Standard.** As an executive, your employees look to you to know what to wear. If you turn up in ripped jeans and a grubby T-shirt, then your staff will, too.
- **Casual Clothing; Casual Attitude.** With time, business casual became more casual, and so did work habits and attitudes. How do you get everyone back to business and tell them how to dress?

Business Casual Defined

In their 1999 book, *Business Casual Made Easy* (Business Casual Publications, New York), Ilene Amiel and Angie Michael described business casual as a merger of two distinctly different clothing styles, business and casual. It combines the professionalism and credibility of business clothing with the comfort and creativity of casual clothing. By using extensive research, they developed three levels of business casual—classic, smart, relaxed—based on industry and geography.

- **Classic.** One step down from traditional business clothing. The key item of clothing is a jacket. This level is typically worn in the hospitality, financial and professional services industries in major metropolitan areas.
- **Smart.** Two-piece outfits or layers. It is the most widely accepted interpretation of business casual across Canada and the U.S.
- **Relaxed.** The most casual, is recommended only for organizations that permit denim and jeans, such as IT and new media. It is sometimes adopted by organizations as a summer or Casual Friday dress code.

While the overall concept of business casual has remained the same, the three levels of business casual have evolved. Businesspeople are now dressing down by degrees and for context.

Appearance as Communication

We sometimes forget that our appearance is one of our most powerful nonverbal communications tools. We can use it to send subtle but strong messages. For example, if you are tall and always wear dark colors, you might be considered intimidating. By adding a light-color shirt or top, you will appear more approachable. Or, if you usually wear a suit with a shirt and tie, simply removing the tie and unbuttoning your shirt (one or two buttons) will make you appear more open, or less buttoned-up.

When dressing for work, think of the message you want your appearance to send. If you want to come across as powerful and authoritative, wear dark colors and smooth fabrics. If you have a tough message to tell your employees, wear muted colors and softer fabrics.

Easy Ways to Make an Outfit More Casual

Color. Adding color is one of the easiest ways to make an outfit more casual. Combine neutral colors such as navy, gray, brown, taupe and black with non-traditional colors such as blue, red, yellow, burgundy, orange, pink and turquoise. If you normally wear a dark suit with a white or pale blue shirt, try a deeper-colored shirt that complements your coloring. For women, pants with a matched or unmatched jacket, and a bright colored sweater or top, create a casual, professional look.

Pattern. When I say “pattern,” clients often panic. Men will tell me “I don’t do pattern,” while wearing a striped tie. Women cringe and say, “I don’t do flowers.” While stripes and flowers are patterns, there are also checks, herringbone, paisley, abstract prints, polka dots. And yes, adding pattern can be scary but it is also very easy. Adding just one pattern can make something more casual. Simply wearing a striped shirt or a checked jacket adds pattern.

Texture. How a fabric looks and feels. Typically, a smooth, stiff fabric such as wool is considered formal when used in suits. Fabrics such as

tweeds, knits, corduroy, and sweaters are often soft to the touch and can instantly make any outfit more casual. Try a tweed jacket with a pair of wool gabardine pants. Or instead of a shirt under a suit, women can wear a sweater or knit top.

Accessories. Shoes, jewelry, bags, belts and scarves are a quick and easy way to make an outfit more casual. Metals, gemstones, gold and pearls are formal. Jewelry made from items such as wood, plastic, silver and ethnic motifs are more casual. For women, an ethnic style necklace or belt worn with a formal suit instantly adds a less formal tone. Similarly, a patterned scarf also adds instant informality. Shoes, too, can add informality. As a guideline, thin-soled shoes are considered dressy, while thicker soles are more casual. For women, a lower-heeled shoe or boot automatically makes your look more casual.

Taking the Fear Out of Dressing Down: A Case History

Bill had recently changed jobs. A seasoned customer service manager in a bank, he moved to a more senior role with an IT company. As expected, Bill made the transition quickly, adapting readily to the entrepreneurial culture and learning new buzzwords so he could communicate with his staff. He thought things were going really well until he had his three-month review. The president explained that Bill's staff thought he was unfriendly and remote because he always wore a suit. To help make the transition from formal to less formal clothing, the president asked me to work with Bill.

The first step was to look at Bill's wardrobe. He had two types of clothing: formal—suits, and really casual—jeans and sweatshirts. Bill's suits were all dark colors—grey, navy and black. His dress shirts were white or pale blue and his ties had conservative stripes. Clearly, he needed to add some color and variety. With color analysis, we determined that soft muted blues, grays and taupes were the most flattering for his coloring. While Bill felt comfortable with the colors, he was concerned about incorporating color into his daily routine.

We started slowly, by adding some striped shirts to his wardrobe. He wore these open at the neck with his suits. To get comfortable with the look, I encouraged him to walk around the office and have staff meetings without a jacket.

Then we moved him from suits into sports jackets and coordinating pants. I suggested he try a sports jacket a couple of days a week. Once he was comfortable with that look, we added more sports jackets, coordinating pants, shirts, ties and sweaters. We worked together to develop different looks—mixing and matching colors, adding textures and layers. I reorganized his closet, took photos and prepared wardrobe charts so that getting ready in the morning was as easy as putting on a suit. In addition to clothing, we picked out new eyeglass frames and visited a hairstylist for a more modern cut.

Bill's transformation from buttoned-up to open and friendly was quite a journey. His staff now finds him approachable. They compliment him on his clothing and ask him where he shops. Some have even asked for lessons on mixing and matching colors. The president says he looks like a new man!

Looking Professional in Every Situation: A Case History

As president of a manufacturing company, Lindsay meets with suppliers and distributors, and attends trade shows and industry functions. After a recent strategic planning retreat, her company realized that they needed to re-brand to attract new customers. This would mean travel throughout North America and Europe to meet industry leaders, potential suppliers and distributors and to attend trade shows.

Lindsay's style of dressing hasn't changed throughout her career. She started working in the plant, became a supervisor, and moved up through management to become president. Most days, she wears jeans with sweaters. For tradeshow and industry functions, she has one black suit that she bought about ten years ago. She wears her hair in a ponytail and is uncomfortable with makeup.

To work with Lindsay, I really needed to understand what she did every day, so I shadowed her. We talked about her vision, her long-term and short-term objectives for the company, and her travel plans. Then we focused on her vision for herself. She knew she needed to look more polished and professional, but was afraid she would lose her “self” in the process.

It was quite an education. I assessed her colors, helped her understand her body shape and how to enhance it, introduced her to different clothing styles, presented her with options, and sent her to a hairstylist and makeup artist. In addition, I coached Lindsay on international business and social etiquette.

To build her wardrobe, I created capsules of basic clothing items such as pants, tops, jackets and accessories that worked together. See more on capsule dressing in Karen Brunger’s chapter, *Capsule Dressing for Men and Women*, on page 35. I picked simple, classic styles that could go from the shop floor to the boardroom, after a quick stop to remove the hardhat. I picked a combination of fabrics—wool with a bit of Lycra for ease of movement, washable microfiber for travel and plant visits, and cotton for comfort. We replaced Lindsay’s black suit with interesting jackets—tweed, tone on tone, fitted dark-wash denim, plain with a trim that said “professional” yet reflected her down-to-earth style and personality. Rather than shirts, I selected tops and sweaters in soft colors and subtle patterns.

After her first business trip to Europe, Lindsay and I met to debrief. She said there were a couple of companies interested in distribution deals, so the trip was worthwhile. More importantly, Lindsay felt her updated image really reflected who she was and helped her represent her company with confidence and professionalism.

Seven Ways to Keep It Stylish

We all know that we have to keep our business skills up-to-date, but we're so busy doing that, we forget we need to keep our wardrobe up-to-date. It doesn't need to take a lot of time, but even the slightest update can make a big difference in how you are perceived.

- 1. Add one or two items each season.** I know you buy classics and they should last forever. But eventually they go out of style or wear out and need to be replaced every few years. Add a new jacket or pair of pants that mixes and matches with what you already have.
- 2. Buy a shirt, tie, blouse, sweater or top in one of the season's hottest colors.** This is an easy way to make an old outfit look brand new. If you normally wear a solid-color shirt with your sports jacket, try a striped one. Remember to check that the color is flattering; otherwise, you'll have a lot of people inquiring about your health.
- 3. Add new accessories.** A new belt, shoes, jewelry, scarf, watch or bag can make an outfit look completely different. Think about replacing your diving watch with something more streamlined. Add a chunky necklace. Retire those shoes that used to be black but have turned grey. Subliminally you're saying, "I'm on top of my game."
- 4. Eyeglass frames.** This is one of the quickest ways to update your look. Get a new style every couple of years when you get your eyes checked. Those aviator frames you've been wearing for years may be back in style, but even Tom Cruise has moved on.
- 5. Update your makeup.** Like clothing, makeup lines bring in different looks and colors each season. While the look may not suit you, try a fresh color of lipstick, eyeliner or shadow. If you paint your nails, try one of the new nail colors.
- 6. Get a new hairstyle, or change the color of your hair.** After new glasses, a new hairstyle is an instant way to change your look. It can make you look and feel like a million bucks. If you're not sure about a new hair color, try a semi-permanent hair

color that will wash out. Remember, though, coloring your hair is a commitment and you have to keep it up.

7. Shop in your closet. We're all guilty of the 80/20 rule—wearing twenty percent of our wardrobe eighty percent of the time. So what about that 80 percent you don't wear? Get an image consultant to help you find new ways to wear things. It's amazing what a fresh pair of eyes can do for your wardrobe.

When getting ready for work, there is really only one thing to ask yourself. What message do I want my appearance to send? Take the time to regularly assess your wardrobe. Use the guidelines in this chapter to update, refine or redefine your look so it always says what you want it to say. If you think of your appearance as a communications tool like your computer or cell phone, you'll never have to worry about business casual again. You'll always send the right message.



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Inspiring confidence and trust

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An effective image makes the difference between inspiring confidence, building your own confidence or losing trust. Anne understands the issues and challenges facing business. Before launching Here's Looking at You, she gained extensive national and international marketing and communications experience in both the public and private sectors. She combines that business expertise with image consulting and training in adult learning to help organizations improve their image.

Through workshops and seminars, Anne provides image enhancement advice, verbal and nonverbal communication skills education, culture-specific coaching and etiquette and protocol training. She works with teams to develop dress codes, improve social interaction skills and refine their business image so they represent your company with confidence and professionalism. Her clients come from business sectors such as financial services, information technology, pharmaceutical, retail, real estate, energy, education and not-for-profit.

Known for her approachability and practicality, Anne also works one-on-one with clients in various ways, including assessing their wardrobes, taking them shopping, helping with verbal and nonverbal communication, or reviewing business and social etiquette. Her clients gain confidence from an enhanced image that strengthens their authenticity.

Anne is a Certified Professional Member of the Association of Image Consultants International and is a past president of the Canada/Toronto chapter.

“Executive Image Power is the key resource for always making a great impression, feeling confident and getting the results you want. Your image matters when networking and building relationships. This book has hundreds of great ideas and insights and is a ‘must read’ for every career-minded professional.”

—Jill Lublin, Author of *Get Noticed-Get Referrals*, *Networking Magic*, and *Guerilla Publicity*

Your executive or professional image is the message you send out to your clients, potential clients and colleagues every time you walk in a room, attend a meeting or talk on the phone. Rev up your executive image power now by implementing the easy tips and techniques recommended by top image experts who have joined together to give you their most powerful career-building strategies.

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