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A dress code that will never go out of style

Amy Verner's Suitable

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Suitable launched more than two years ago with the mission to steer readers through work wardrobe woes. I touched upon tattoos, explored overdressing and got down to bra basics (highlights included nipple covers and the 9to5 Bra). We went on field trips (remember the "first date dress code" at Toronto company I Love Rewards?) and heard firsthand from designers such as Philip Sparks. The Get Suitable contest not only made winners out of Daryl Ross and Jennifer Moore, but revealed how little effort is necessary to transform anyone's professional image from dull to dynamic.

Now, Suitable is hanging up its hat, at least as you've come to know and love it (look for continued coverage of office-attire issues in Life Style on Saturdays). But I will not consider Suitable a job well done until I leave you all with one last list of takeaway tips. Once again, I have turned to my trusted experts, who have weighed in with their favourite strategies and quick-fix solutions.

We have always labelled the column "Work Couture," but I'd like to think we've provided work advice that's ready-to-wear. And as I bid farewell, I have faith you're ready to go (shoes shined, of course).

KEEP CLOTHES NEAT AND WRINKLE-FREE

"Your clothes should always be neat and freshly pressed," says Angèle Desgagné who operates Imagélite International from Oakville, Ont. Stains, rips and tears are unacceptable, she adds. "Paying attention to the details sends the message that you are a person capable of managing complex and detail-oriented projects." One clever trick: Hang your jacket in the car during the morning commute.

BUY A FANTASTIC JACKET

Even at a time when no one wants to spend needlessly, it pays to invest in a jacket, says Sarah Collins, a Toronto-based image consultant. "This piece can stretch your wardrobe from business attire with a pair of suitable slacks, to weekend chic with your favourite jeans." If you're in the market for one right now, the silhouette for women this fall puts strong emphasis on the shoulder. Men, meanwhile, should look for tailored options. This does not mean skinny; rather, better fitting armholes and a slimmer body.

AND KEEP A SPARE ONE IN YOUR OFFICE

In a casual office environment, you may be able to avoid a suit and tie in front of colleagues. But there will always be circumstances when formality is required - and these often arise on a moment's notice. [Anne Sowden of Here's Looking At You image consulting](#) in Toronto recommends keeping an "emergency jacket" in a neutral colour at work. "It's easy to slip on when the CEO wants to see you, your biggest client drops by unexpectedly or you get asked to appear on the evening news."

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WHEN IN DOUBT, SKIP THE PLEATS

Leah Morrigan, a men's image consultant, wants to settle a pressing question she often hears from clients: "A flat-front trouser always looks

neater and more flattering than a pleated pair." I believe there are exceptions: Men with larger waists can actually look slimmer - and feel more comfortable - with pleats. But for those who are stumped, stick with Ms. Morrigan's advice.

CREATE A WARDROBE BUDGET

"Working on a wardrobe budget is just as practical as regular budgeting," says Cathy DeSerranno, the designated style consultant for the shops at First Canadian Place, in the heart of Toronto's financial core. And while it seems counterintuitive, hiring a wardrobe professional can actually save you money by ensuring that purchases are made wisely. Some malls and stores offer complimentary personal shopping services, but the level of attention you receive from an independent consultant - who comes into your home and works with you over an extended period - is usually worth the cost.

DRESS LIKE YOUR BOSS

If working with a pro isn't your thing, do your own reconnaissance. If you're new, ask human resources whether there is a dress code. Or observe how your boss dresses and follow suit, Ms. DeSerranno says. He or she should be setting an example. For tips on putting together ensembles and accessories, take a cue from the way your favourite stores have dressed their mannequins.

HAVE A 'HERO' DRESS

This is a woman's wardrobe passe-partout, says Diane Craig, founder of Corporate Class, an image and etiquette company. It works for every occasion and can be accessorized for day or evening. What qualifies is "a dress that is comfortable, hides the tummy and falls nicely over the hips." Also don't forget sleeves, a flattering neckline and a hemline that grazes the knee. And think beyond the LBD: Perhaps your most flattering colour is chocolate brown or deep crimson.

MANAGE YOUR CLOSET

Being organized isn't just handy at the office. A well-managed closet takes the stress out of getting dressed, says Damon Allan, the founder of Alexander Steel Image Consulting in Hamilton. "Separate your business suits from your blazers, sports jacket and pants. It makes for easy pickings in the morning." Another tip: When splurging on shoes, get shoe trees. Keeping footwear in good form "will payoff in dividends through the years of usage you will get out of them. Men and women should edit what they no longer wear - or fit into, Ms. DeSerranno says. "Dress for your weight at the moment, not what you want to weigh in six months."

CARRY A PROPER BAG

"Get rid of the black nylon bag they gave you at the last conference," Ms. Craig says. Bags and briefcases are a golden opportunity to inject style and personality into an otherwise conservative wardrobe. Best of all, you can buy local without breaking the bank: Roots, Rudsak, MO851 and Matt and Nat (a vegan line) are all Canadian brands that eschew flashy logos for quality and good design.

KNOW WHICH RULES TO BREAK, AND WHEN

I was once told never to wear black with navy unless I wanted to look like a bruise. I've since learned that, when done thoughtfully, the colour combo can be a much fresher and distinctive statement than solid black.

Indeed, being "stylishly in sync" means knowing which rules to break, says Diana Kilgour, a Vancouver-based image consultant. "Today," she points out, "belts and shoes shouldn't match but still must be related in colour, material and mood."

One trusty rule of thumb: "The paler or lighter the fabric at your hem, the lighter or more delicate your shoe should be." And Leslie Davies, an image consultant in Calgary, reminds that suits need not be worn together. "Break them up into separates," she says. "This is one of the most cost-effective and versatile ways to stretch your wardrobe to be more functional."