

# Uniforms: Add some splash to off-the-rack duds



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SUITABLE**

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Perhaps because Suitable primarily focuses on the appropriateness and inappropriateness of office attire, it operates under the premise that people are able to make choices about their clothes, even if within a strict dress code.

But many people in the work force have no choice and are required to wear uniforms.

Essentially, these are selfless sartorial statements. People have to shelve their favourite outfits for the sake of the job.

"The whole thing with a uniform is that it's an image that relates to the overall corporate image, and it's an identifier," Toronto-based image consultant Anne Sowden says.

"When you walk in, you know the person wearing a uniform is someone you can go to. They represent the company," she says.

What may feel oppressive to those who enjoy expressing their individuality through fashion ("uniform" and "uniformity" are semantic siblings, after all) can be a blessing in disguise.

Just think: No time is wasted in the morning wondering

what to wear; no one feels inferior because his or her clothes do not measure up, and employers do not have to double as fashion police.

A uniform, however, is not a "get out of jail free" card for forgoing all aspects of personal appearance.

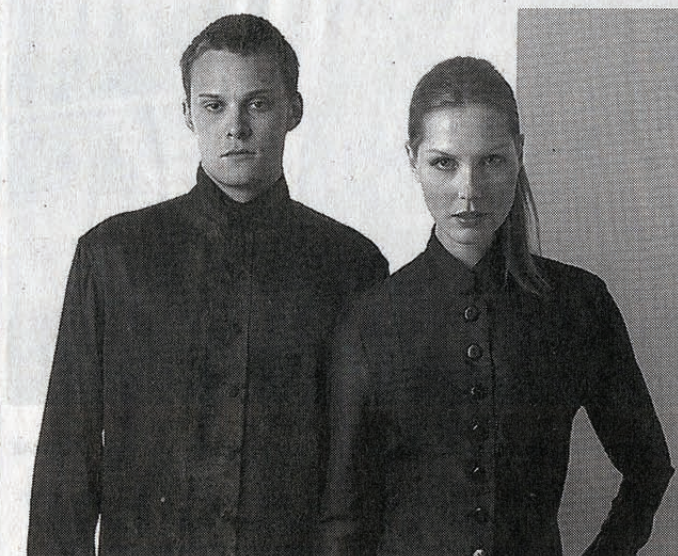
According to Ms. Sowden, people should operate under the same presentation principles whether they wear a suit or a uniform. "If people are neat, their clothes fit and they've taken the time, this sends a message that their work is important to them and that you are important to them. It's about respect, no matter what [they] do."

Neither should a uniform be interpreted as a life sentence to looking unstylish.

Cool sunglasses are an option if you work outdoors. A hairstyle, from classic to current, goes a long way toward revealing what type of person you are. With the exception of over-the-top bling, which is best left for after hours, jewellery that has sentimental value is the best reminder you have a life outside of work. It's also an easy conversation starter.

Derek Friday (that's really his name) can soon be seen sporting sometimes boring, sometimes humorous uniforms on *Mr. Friday*, a new reality show on the Slice network that dumps this privileged, Ottawa-born 27-year-old into a menial job every week.

"It was daunting," he says of his enforced outfits that in-



**Toronto designer Franco Mirabelli has fashioned outfits for the staff of the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts.** ARLINE MALAKIAN

cluded safari-style khakis at Reptilia reptile zoo and a blue and black outfit when removing trash for 1-800-Got-Junk. "I don't like putting on things that are ill-fitting or the wrong colour because ... it makes me uncomfortable."

And when he's uncomfortable, "[I] don't feel like I look good."

That may sound like a circular and superficial complaint, but Mr. Friday – who, at 6 foot 3, has dabbled in modelling – thinks that companies would be wise not to dismiss it.

"I feel like employers can actually do the research and find something that is cost-effective and appealing to everyone," he says, adding that he would

"pop" the collar of his uniform shirts or unbutton them lower than instructed.

"Having staff look good works for an employer in the long run because [people] want to see beautiful people in beautiful clothes," he continues, stressing that this has nothing to do with sexual exploitation. "It's reality; [people] are visual."

Some employees may find themselves in the fortunate position of working for a company that has given its uniforms a modish makeover. Last April, designer Bruce Oldfield created A-line skirts and geometric printed blouses for McDonald's employees in Britain (guys were outfitted in

black and beige polo shirts).

NBC had Brooks Brothers update the suit options for its page program (through which college graduates get their first taste of broadcasting), and the process became an interactive viewer contest on the *Today* show (people could vote for the best of four different looks).

Toronto designer Franco Mirabelli has fashioned original outfits for the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts and for the front-of-house staff at Mark McEwan's tony restaurant One in the Hazelton Hotel.

Most flattering of all are Pink Tartan's vintage-inspired styles for Porter Airlines.

As eye-catching and media-worthy as these fashionable uniforms are, Ms. Sowden points out that designers can't be as creative as with their ready-to-wear collections. Quantity, cost-effectiveness, durability and a wide range of body types present many challenges.

"There is always risk; you may have the perception that a certain label has wonderful styles and fabrics and then see them and think 'ick,'" she says, referring to fabrics that may look cheap but hold up against spills and frequent laundering.

The best uniforms, however, may be personal uniforms; those default ensembles that you have assembled yourself and that make you feel at the top of your game.

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