

The corporate fashion code

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More often than not, an impressive CV and determined work ethic must be complemented with a wardrobe that inspires confidence.

We are bombarded by images of the perfect body, the hottest labels and the latest trends, but when it comes to choosing a work wardrobe, many are at risk of falling somewhere between boring and burlesque.

“Because the dress code has become so relaxed, image is to the fore and there is so much choice. There is more confusion than ever when deciding how to dress appropriately at work,” says Brona O’Boyle, image consultant with XenerGie Executive Coaching.

“Being brilliant at your job is not enough,” says O’Boyle, who has more than 18 years’ experience with some of London’s top marketing companies, and a wealth of style knowledge for working women.

Whether you are attending a job interview or securing a multimillion euro contract, Boyle stresses that “brand differentiation matters”.

She says women should recognise that creating their own powerful, memorable identity through their dress contributes greatly to their success in the workplace.

The fact that image matters can be seen in the increasing numbers of companies that bring in image consultants, make-up artists and hairstylists to advise employees on grooming.

The UCD Michael Smurfit School of Business this year held image workshops for its aspiring business students, and Gloss magazine’s Look the Business catwalk event was heavily attended by people in business.

Image coach Maggie Gibbons, who works with the Style Coaching Institute, agrees that personal branding is vital for success. “It is important to realise that if you don’t create a personal brand for yourself someone else will,” she says.

Gibbons refers to social psychologist Albert Mehrabian, who said there were three aspects to face-to-face communication which determine how we view the person who is communicating a message to us: words account for only 7 per cent, tone of voice for 38 per cent and body language for 55 per cent.

This means that when we're trying to get a message across in business, the way we present ourselves can be more important than what we actually say.

When dressing for work, the goal, says Gibbons, is to ask: 'Who exactly are you? How would you describe yourself? How would people who know you socially describe you? How would people you work with describe you?' You then look for consistencies within this and try to develop your personal brand. "You need to look at your value system and at the image you want to portray."

O'Boyle says women should ask themselves how they want to come across: "Do you want to appear efficient, elegant, fair, successful, authentic, fashionable, stylish, current, compassionate, friendly, professional, well-educated, creative, dynamic?"

O'Boyle offers one-on-one image consulting to business people, many of whom have reached a certain level in their career, but are either unable to progress further or are not receiving the respect they deserve at their current level. "Often my clients have been promoted, but are unable to fit fully into the role, because their personal brand has not made the shift in line with the new job."

One of O'Boyle's recent clients had received a top promotion, but other staff were not recognising her position. O'Boyle said her first move was to change her outdated wardrobe, which was out of sync with her position.

Much of the client's clothing was more than ten years old, and her footwear was uncoordinated with the rest of her clothes. Another client found that, having been promoted, her casual work wardrobe no longer sufficed.

Having established your personal brand and decided upon the non-verbal messages you wish to convey, there are some basic rules to follow when it comes to dressing for work.

It seems that the most common misinterpretation of workwear surrounds the term 'smart-casual'. At its most formal, smart-casual means tailored suiting with a long-sleeved shirt; at the casual end of the spectrum, it can include dresses and knitwear.

It is important to dress appropriately for the business you are in and for your position within that business.

Gibbons advises clients to "always emulate the best example of what you see and never, ever wear jeans or anything with a logo".

One way to be confident in your workwear is to build up a work capsule wardrobe. O'Boyle says it is possible to make around 50 different outfits from 15 well-chosen items of clothing. The capsule wardrobe includes the most essential piece of clothing in a

business woman's wardrobe - tailored trousers and a skirt suit. It also includes a twin set, a polonecked sweater, several skirts, vests, blouses and camisoles.

It is essential that you have the accessories to go with it - shoes, handbags, belts, scarves and jewellery. Always invest in the best quality pieces you can afford, as good tailored pieces can survive several seasons and the look can be constantly updated with on-trend accessories.

It is less expensive to change shoes and costume jewellery than to buy a new suit each season. By buying the best you can afford and seeking advice on shape and style, you will save in the long run.

Colour can have a strong psychological effect on people. A brown suit on a man, for example, can instil feelings of mistrust; on a woman, it can have the opposite effect, making her seem earthy and nurturing - an undesirable effect if seeking to achieve authority and distance.

The more high-contrast the colour combination you choose, the more authority you convey; tone-on-tone combinations will make you more approachable, and pastels may give the impression that you're a pushover.

Grey is probably the most versatile colour for the basic capsule work wardrobe - it's contemporary and gives greater scope in terms of coordinating colours. Brunettes should consider coordinating grey with red and black, while blondes should consider going for grey-blue, soft white and pinks.

Big no-nos in workwear include revealing clothing and low tops: the more flesh you show, the more unprofessional you will be perceived to be. In warm weather, it is always better to bare the legs rather than the décolletage. Closed-toe shoes are generally better than open-toe.

Avoid hippy, bohemian jewellery if you want to be taken seriously, and opt instead for bold, striking pieces in gold or silver. Wear the best watch you can afford - this is particularly true of men's wardrobes, where quality shoes, glasses, watches and cufflinks can make positive impact. General grooming applies, too, and a good haircut is essential: an old hairstyle equates to old ideas.

"Your working wardrobe should be thought of as a basic work skill, not as an optional extra," says O'Boyle.

"The key question is, 'does your image make the right impact to aid your success, or does it hinder and undersell you?' Regardless of how much effort you have put into it, you already have a personal image, but there is so much more that can be done than wearing a black suit and white shirt."

Expert executive and image coaches Brona O'Boyle and Lorna McDowell of XenerGie Executive Coaching host regular weekend courses in personal branding and executive training for success. www.xenergie.com. For one-to-one personal branding consultations, visit www.bronao.com

Maggie Gibbons and Pamela Fay host a one-day course entitled The Polished Professional on May 29. Contact Pamela on Pamela@bpp.ie, or call 0861737125

Top tips for work dressing

Do

- * Choose a classic design that won't date
- * Buy the best you can afford
- * Invest in a suit or a jacket with coordinating skirt or trousers
- * Accessorise with this season's colours and styles
- * Stick to neutral colours
- * Choose an elegant fit for skirts – slightly above or below the knee
- * Choose darker shades – they convey more authority
- * Choose natural fabrics – they wear better

Don't

- *Wear too much make-up– avoid an orange face or body
- * Wear too much jewellery
- * Buy the latest fad
- * Buy one-off designs that work with nothing else in your wardrobe
- * Wear anything too tight or revealing
- * Choose flashy bright colours for suits
- * Choose busy patterns – they are less versatile
- * Wear fabrics that wrinkle easily

By image consultant Geraldine Brand www.geraldinebrand.com