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Dressing for Success

By Marilyn Johnson

We've all heard the expression, "Clothes make the man," and the mantra, "Dress for success." These and similar phrases such as "dress-up," "blue collar," "good clothes" and "Sunday best" have been with us for centuries. Hundreds more commonly used references to clothing and dressing in countries around the world go back hundreds and even thousands of years. Notions about appearance and what clothing says about those who wear it are common, universal and timeless; otherwise these phrases would have disappeared from usage.

Although the first clothing worn by humans was purely functional and served as a survival aid, it quickly became a canvas for experimentation of techniques and embellishment. The more embellished a garment, the more special it became. Perhaps it was the time, skill and energy required to produce a garment that made it so valued that it took on all sorts of special significance. Even the earliest of our ancestors made special garments for special occasions and treated them with great care. As time passed, clothing began to define social distinctions, economic status and gender. Clans and tribes could be identified by the style of their clothing. In some cases, a person's occupation could be determined by his or her clothing.

Skip forward to the present and we have inherited all of the traditional associations of clothing and continue to abide by them. When a student graduates from school he wears a cap and gown, and a certain style of white coat identifies people who work in the medical field. We have uniforms to identify special parts of our society, not the least of which include the military, the police and firemen. Occupational clothing is still with us. Today we have spacesuits as well as nuns' habits and priests' collars. Gender distinctions in clothing continue to be the norm, even though women wear pantsuits as often as skirts. The buttons and zippers on women's and men's clothing are still reversed, and the detailing, fabrics and embellishments are different.

How does all of this apply to the business field? Before even saying, "Hello," or reaching out to shake hands, the first impression customers gain comes from appearance. Anyone seeking to assure customers that he is professional, knowledgeable, trustworthy and deserving of that person's business has to look the part.

It means looking at a business wardrobe with a few questions in mind. Does this outfit reflect the typical clothing worn in a specific profession (identity)? Does it reflect a high position within the company (status)? Is it flattering in its colors, style lines and design details (self-worth)? What does this outfit say about the person who wears it, about how he thinks of himself and his business (image and attitude)? Does it convey confidence and inspire trust (outcome)? Without a doubt, clothes say all these things.

Every business spends untold hours, dollars and effort to create an image of itself; coordinating business cards, stationery, brochures, logos and media campaigns are designed to get the message out and embedded in the minds of customers. All of that can be undone in an instant if company representatives or employees do not present themselves to match the image the business has created. It is important to look at the business wardrobe with the same care and critical eye that designs the business cards.

A lot of things may have changed throughout the course of history, but clothing has never lost its ability to make a lasting first impression. Look at it closely; admire the workmanship, the fabric and design. Most of all think about the reasons for buying or wearing it, what it means to business and what it says about the person who's wearing it.

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