

Strategic Management



Go Home and Put on Some Clothes!

Has Casual Friday Gone Over the Top?

By Audrey Nelson, PhD

Look at how people are dressed at work. Does it seem as if “casual Friday” has become a weeklong event? Does your organization have a dress code with specific guidelines?

Human behaviorist Desmond Morris wrote in *Man Watching: A Field Guide to Human Behavior*, “It is impossible to wear clothes without transmitting social signals.” Like it or not, our dress conveys messages of how we want to

be seen. Fifty years of research tells us you can change perceptions of people by changing their clothes. There is no getting around it. As Voltaire eloquently said, “Dress changes the manner.”

Don't forget the importance of first impressions. You only get one shot at it. And, yes, your mother was right! Life is not fair and we do judge a book by its cover. In fact, we judge a company's image and credibility in part on how employees are dressed. There is no dress rehearsal for a first impression. Remember, we meet everybody for the first time. Right or wrong, the average person makes four to six stereotypes about us within the first 30 seconds and most of these stereotypes are formed by nonverbal cues of dress and appearance. First impressions help determine if we close the deal, win the contract, but also often dictate the future of a relationship.

Dress has persuasive value that influences the behavior of others. Clothing may influence the extent to which another person may consider us credible. It is often read as a sign of character.

Women tend to be more prone to dress code violations than men because of the complexity and variation of women's clothing.

For example, the Britney Spears phenomenon represents a formula of less clothing equals less credibility in the workplace.

Next question concerns a possible double standard. Do we have different dress codes for men and women? For

example, can we have dress codes that could prohibit a man from wearing pierced earrings? Disney allows one hole in each woman's ear and no pierced earrings for men. As a general rule, corporations can have different dress code rules for men and women.

Most employers realize that social norms, business needs and safety should guide dress codes. If it is applied uniformly it does not violate a person's civil rights.

Here are a few specific guidelines for women:

- Do a once-over in front of the mirror to ensure no cleavage is showing.
- The “2-inch rule” applies to hemlines and height of heels. Any hemline that exceeds 2 inches above the knee (I have seen 3 to 5 inches above the knee in some Fortune 500 companies!) is simply too short. Heels that are 3 and 4 inches are called stilettos. Stilettos were designed for sex appeal to push up the calf muscle and draw attention to the leg. Don't wear them!
- Say no to Spandex. Work is not the place for provocative, tight-fitting apparel.
- Avoid the Britney Spears syndrome: No midriff showing. Feel a draft at your midriff? Skin showing between your shirt and waistline? Don't wear it. Okay on your time at a club; not appropriate for work.

Unless you work for one of the handful of surviving Internet start-ups, wearing vintage Pumas and a Def Leppard T-shirt to work may

no longer cut the mustard. According to the American Industry Dress Code Survey, a national poll of 201 senior executives at companies with more than \$500 million in annual revenue, more than half of large businesses (56 percent) maintain a business attire policy – that means a suit and tie for the guys and a suit or dress for the gals. A crucial,

Few of my clients have this in place. Consequently, they are often creating more problems and potentially embarrassing situations as well as driving customers and clients away! Just yesterday, I tried to buy a bagel at our local shop and I was unable to look the employee in the face due to their heart-stopping body art! Another dress code violation for

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proactive measure for all organizations is to have a specific and detailed punch list for dress code and appearance violations.

another time. Generation X and Y's love affair with body art or what I call the “pincushion syndrome!” And then there are tattoos...

