

Business Casual for Women: Just How Casual Should You Be?

The way you dress speaks volumes about who you are as a person and as a business professional.

Let's face it, clothes talk.

Whenever you meet someone for the first time, it takes only a few seconds for people you've never met to form impressions of you and your abilities. You don't have to say a word, your clothes and body language will always speak first.

Some of the impressions people can make solely from your appearance are:

- your intelligence.
- your professionalism.
- your credibility.

Fair? No, but it happens.

Your corporate culture and your position in it should assist you in your choice of business attire. Some organizations still expect female executives to wear a dark, skirted suit with a solid, light blouse. However, more and more businesses are moving to full-time business casual.

How to Dress for Business Casual Days

Women can often get away with a wider range of attire than men. Let common sense, comfort and professionalism temper your choices when dressing for business casual occasions.

The Eyes Have It - In business, your clothing should not distract. It should direct attention to your face and particularly your eyes. When you have eye contact with a person, they tend to listen.

In contrast, patterned nylons can draw the eye to the legs. Noisy bracelets, chunky brooches, or other large jewelry can also distract the eye. The same goes for clothing that is shiny, sheer, or clinging.

And who can stay focused on your eyes when you have your fingers manicured with fuschia polish and 10 miniature daisies painted on the tips?

Fashion or Folly - It is said that style never goes out of fashion. On the other hand, fashions do go out of style.

Standing out as fashionable is not always a "good thing". It may generate negative perceptions. In addition, anyone at the cutting edge of fashion who is not in the fashion industry runs the risk of looking "wrong" in the eyes of others, because that "fashion forward" look may make another person uncomfortable.

Potluck – While leaving your clothing choice to chance (what's on sale this month?) may seem like an adventure, it stops you from defining your image and shaping perceptions that others have of you.

Many clients interpret your appearance in terms of what you know about the world around you and what attention you give to detail. These images can, however unfair they may be, determine people's perceptions of your work.

Here are some general **Do's & Don'ts** to help you determine what's "in" and "out" when it comes to Business Casual.

Do ask your human resources department for official guidelines. Business casual means different things at different companies

Do check your daily planner to make sure you don't have any meetings that require formal business attire.

Do wear pant suits. Black slacks and a contrasting jacket is also acceptable.

Do check hemlines. A skirt that ends at the knee when you're standing looks chic and professional.

Do accessorize with a silk scarf or classic bracelet to give your casual outfit a polished look.

Don't wear clothes that talk louder than you do.

Don't squeeze into your clothes. Wearing clothes too small is too much!

Don't wear extremes of nail length and polish colour, especially in conservative industries.

Don't wear funky platform, athletic shoes or strappy sandals.

In addition to tailored blouses, tailored knit sweaters and sweater sets are appropriate business casual choices.

Keep the makeup light. Let your natural beauty shine through.

A SPECIAL NOTE ON SCENT

Any perfume or cologne, should not be overly noticeable at normal business proximity. Scent should never be a distraction. Also, if you will be in a healthcare setting, you should not wear anything scented because perfumes can aggravate certain medical conditions and allergies.

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Cathy Kuzel, author of Are you a Collector or a Connector, publishes "Connect!" a monthly ezine providing free information and resources for entrepreneurs. She is a professional speaker and trainer on sales, customer service, professional development and a guru at networking.

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