



WORKING LIFE

Clothes maketh the man – or woman

Dressing well at work is vital for sending the right message, say consultants

By DICKSON LI

"THE apparel oft proclaims the man," Shakespeare once wrote, paraphrasing the old Latin proverb *vestis virum facit* – clothes maketh the man. And to this, Mark Twain cheekily appended: "Naked people have little or no influence on society."

But despite this well-known adage, once employees have been on the job long enough, many start getting lazy, tending to throw on whatever is available in the morning and turn up for work. But consultants say that is definitely not acceptable.

Ms Denise Ng, president of the Association of Image Consultants International, South Asia-Singapore Chapter, said: "A well-dressed person gives the right message about his or her attitude, aptitude and personal qualities."

However, dress codes vary between industries.

"Power dressing plays a more important role in industries where a high level of trust is required, such as in banking, because it gives cues about your level of success and authority, background, ability, status and position," she said.

For Mrs Stefanie Yuen Thio, joint managing director of TSMP Law Corporation, dressing for work is "not about expressing your particular style or personality", but about being "properly attired to do the best job you can for your client".

"If you look at the top legal professionals in Singapore, they are almost unfailingly attired in well-cut and pressed suits. They will be well-coiffed," she said.

But even if you spend your entire workday in a cubicle glued to the computer screen and seldom have external meetings, keeping up appearances is important.

Singapore Management University Associate Professor of Psychology Norman Li said: "When you meet clients, you represent your company. When you don't meet clients, you represent yourself. Thus when your higher-ups see you, it may be good to keep up appearances."

Added Mrs Yuen Thio: "It is impossible to predict who will walk through the door on any given day. The dress code isn't negotiable."

However, said Prof Li: "If everyone else observes a casual dress code, you may elicit negative feelings from co-workers if you insist on overdressing."

For those who find the morning routine of deciding what to wear a daily nightmare, Prof Li has some advice.

"First, find out what the local norms are and observe those norms. Assess how dressed up or down most of the other people are, and pay special attention to what the most successful people are wearing.

"Second, you don't have to have the most expensive and dressy outfits, but make sure your clothes are neat and clean," he said.

For women, there is also the thorny issue of choosing appropriate footwear.

Said Ms Jill Lowe, founder of image consultancy Jill Lowe International: "The heavier and thicker the heels, the more stable

the authority. Thick heels are associated with hard work, while thin heels are associated with leisure.

"Open-toed shoes are often mismatched. When in a formal situation, or when diplomatic or business deals are being discussed, the toes should be sealed."

Added Mrs Yuen Thio: "I generally advise women to draw the line at mules, dominatrix shoes and anything that would make style waves in a Sex And The City movie."

For men, dark-coloured trousers and bright shirts in the workplace should be the norm.

"The darker the colour of trousers, the more authority you have," said Ms Lowe. "If you look at James Bond, he likes to wear a dark shirt with white pants – that is more socially playful. People who go clubbing seldom wear white shirts."

It all comes down to a man's tie, she added: "Lighter ties are for more social situations. For example, dark ties should be worn at board meetings, but if you are meeting business friends, you can choose medium shades like red or yellow."

However, cautioned Mrs Yuen Thio: "Pairing a dark jacket over a random pair of dark-coloured trousers doesn't make it a suit."

Even spectacles can play a part in projecting the right corporate image, Ms Lowe said. "The darker and bigger the frame, the more business-oriented you will look. It is important that the top of your spectacles be parallel with the shape of your eyebrows.

"Talent always involves substance and style. Substance sells, but style up-sells." dicksonl@sph.com.sg