

DRESS FOR SUCCESS: WHAT SHOULD ATTORNEYS WEAR NOW? What Men Should Wear

Blackstone Legal Services originally published this article on May 3, 2012.

Adam White, of Taylor White & McComas, wrote us back with impressive additions for this tip. We largely replaced the original text with his own (presented below).

We extend our thanks to Mr. White for his interest and expertise.

Classic Business versus Corporate Casual

In the early 1990s, a style of apparel called “Corporate Casual” stormed the fashion industry. “Corporate Casual” involved a huge array of casual wear that began to appear in boardrooms, courts, and professional offices where society had never deemed such apparel appropriate. “Corporate Casual” spanned outfits such as khaki cotton pants with a nice golf shirt, quality belt, and loafers up to traditional suits and dress shirts worn without a tie. The casual trend had traction, and it appeared for many years that the trend might permanently change the accepted professional apparel paradigm; a shift much like the change that caused society to shed the vest of a three-piece suit and permanently eliminate the ubiquitous hats worn outside the office or courtroom by many professionals into the 1970s.

Since the economic phenomenon known as the “Great Recession” hit in late 2007 (with the recession’s effects still very present as of this printing in 2012), “Corporate Casual” began to lose popularity as attorneys, business professionals, and job seekers faced significantly increased competition in an equally retracted economy. Thus, the trend back toward classical business apparel for attorneys and other professionals gained momentum and yet remains strong. Many large city attorneys have even reverted to the “long-thought-dead” three-piece suit. Most potential clients, clients, judges, etc., have a half-century engrained image of how a competent, qualified attorney should look, and that look has nothing to do with the fast fading “Corporate Casual.” Unless you work in a rural area (or Texas), classic business apparel is again the hallmark of the qualified, experienced attorney.

Hair

Your hair should not be the focal point of your appearance, make sure you keep it clean, tidy, and rather short. “Puffy” hairstyles went out of favor after the 1980s. Even

with short hair, avoid extremes in style (e.g., strange patterns, abnormal areas of emphasis).

Shirt

You will never go wrong with the classic white dress shirt. The quality of material, however, should be thick enough so that you cannot see through it, and have a high thread count so that the threads cannot be visible by someone close to you.

Avoid wrinkles at all costs. Remember, standard cotton shirts wrinkle no matter what you do and need ironing, and even cotton/polyester blend “wrinkle free” shirts often look frumpy after a few uses. [Attorneys should consider the iron or laundromat/dry cleaners as tools in their professional toolbox.]

Spend a little more for good shirts. \$8 dress shirts always look bad, and \$20 dress shirts will look good at first but will look bad after a few washes. Do not be afraid to spend \$50 or more for a shirt – you will be glad you did. It will last longer and look better. If you think you can pull it off, you can dabble in other colors or patterns, but go to your local suit store to get ideas of what looks good before you waltz into the courtroom in a dark blue shirt and a bright purple tie.

Suits and Sport Coats

In today’s market, most attorneys should wear a matching suit in a neutral color. Every attorney should have at least one dark grey, dark blue, and a black suit. Three-button suits go in and out of style, but two-button suits are classic and appropriate at any time. Under no circumstances should you wear a four or five button suit. Pinstripes, if any, should be very small and meant as a subtle accent; you do not want to scare people by looking like you represent the mob.

At the minimum, wear a jacket and tie to the office, whether a full suit or a conservative sport coat (i.e., blazer) and well-matched trousers. Feel free to shed the jacket while sitting at your desk, but put it on when leaving the office or meeting with clients in the office. Never remove your tie until after hours. Always wear a full suit and tie to court.

Many people – though not most people – cannot tell the quality of suit just by looking at it; but remember thread count. Notice details when purchasing a suit (e.g., pinstripes must line-up and evenly meet at the shoulder and sleeve seams, buttons require four-cross, ample thread attaching them to the jacket through four button holes, side pockets should have “over” flaps rather than just a slit into the pocket, etc.). Typically, the higher the thread count, the better the suit. If you can see the fabric threads,

misaligned seems, improperly attached buttons, poorly creased trouser seems, too narrow/wide lapels, or “slit” side pockets, the suit will look cheap. Further, one thing you must do – even if it startles the menswear clerk – is grasp each sleeve firmly, “scrunch it up” with your hand for a moment, let go, and ensure it quickly “pops” back without any wrinkles.

Another taboo often committed by legal counsel involves failure to tailor the suit (e.g., leaving a “puff lump” below the back of the neck or at the upper back and similar “puff lumps” around the sleeve seams, or trousers that prove flood-worthy or drag on the ground). Along those same lines, if you have gained “experience” pounds, those size 40 suits you once sported are now quite ready for the Salvation Army. Have the department store clerk fit you so you know what size of suit your body requires in this decade.

Avoid wool/polyester blends. Spend the necessary money to buy a professional suit. A solid, quality, attractive, and long-lasting suit will almost certainly cost you no less than \$400-\$500, and it will be worth every penny invested.

Shoes, Belts, and Braces

Do not fall prey to the pseudo-trend toward more casual looking footwear. If the shoes look comfortable enough to run or hike in, they will not look sufficiently professional and will put you in a poor light. Avoid tassels or fancy embellishments unless you know you that they meet with accepted community standards.

Any type of “loafer” (i.e., slip-on shoe) is far too casual for most courtrooms. Laced dress shoes are the standard. The old, staple, “wingtip” shoes are classic, but are usually seen as an executive style (i.e., as older gentlemen’s shoes). Oxford, cap-toe, squared-toe, or “apron” shoes are classically conservative and appropriate.

Wear black or brown dress shoes that match your suit. Always remember that whatever color shoe you select, you must wear the same color belt or braces (suspenders) as well. Belts should be leather, simple, professional looking, thicker, and, again, absolutely match your shoes.

Remember to buy all leather shoes. Less expensive dress shoes have a vinyl-type veneer over cheap leather that, once scraped or scuffed, cannot buff out – it looks like a permanent scab on your shoe.

Ties and Accessories

Neckwear is the only real area of men’s professional apparel where you can show your individual style. Nevertheless, as with most apparel items you get what you pay for;

do not buy inexpensive polyester or cotton ties. Well-constructed silk neckwear that hangs flat and even will serve you well. Such ties typically retail for no less than \$25-\$50.

Cheap ties will not make a good knot. Make sure you know how to tie a good knot with a small dimple directly under the knot. The two favored knots are the Half Windsor and the Full or Double Windsor. If you prefer the Full/Double Windsor but are tired of having a tie that only reaches to your stomach (and not your belt where it should reach), consider buying an extra-long tie next time (extra-long ties are usually six inches longer than standard ties). The tie should break below the top of the belt but not below the bottom of the belt. No bolo ties, unless you live in Texas.

Ties should have a simple pattern, standard coloring (e.g., no “rainbow” ties), and conservative patterns. Avoid novelty ties (e.g., ties imprinted with sketches or drawings of a fishing boat tied to a pier, small cars dotting the fabric, a rustic outdoor scene). Extremely thin and extremely wide ties are fads that come in and out of style, so do not waste your wardrobe space on these. Be careful in wearing tie clips or pins. These fell out of favor in the 1980s. If you wear one, make sure it matches your watch and ring.

Avoid wearing too much jewelry... no pinky rings (again, we do not go for the mob look). A watch, a tie clip or pin if you must, and a wedding ring are acceptable. Further, make sure they all match, do not mix gold and silver.

Many consider red, yellow, and blue as “power” or “authority” colors for ties. Wear a tie that matches your personality and tastes, but avoid colors that “wash” out in the color of your shirt or that make you look sickly or pale.

Summary

Rethink your professional apparel to match both the current trend back toward classic business apparel and the innate, almost subconscious expectations of judges, clients, and potential clients. Notice details when purchasing professional apparel. Do not waste money on inexpensive items that will almost certainly make your appearance frumpy and, due to poor quality, require replacements far sooner than normal. Buy the correct size of shirt, jacket, and tie; have suits professionally tailored and take good care of them – hang them up on solid, broad hangers. Look sharp; look professional; and make the right first and ever ongoing impressions. Indeed, as a famous band once observed, everyone’s “crazy ‘bout a sharp dressed man!”

Written by J. Adam White of Taylor White & McComas (May 4, 2012)

Published by Blackstone Legal Services (May 4, 2012) at www.blackstonelegalservices.com.