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Dressing professionally in the summer heat

With temperatures soaring into the triple digits, appropriate office attire seems to be more and more of a challenge. As continually indicated on national television morning shows and in magazines, wearing inappropriate attire can hurt your image and cast doubt on your credibility and sense of judgment. Certainly, you want to avoid the embarrassment and distractions that occur when you wear clothing that is too revealing, or send the message that comfort is more important than the client's business. So, if you think an item of clothing would be inappropriate for the office, it probably is.

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While every workplace has its own guidelines, and appropriate attire will change depending on the industry and company, here are several basic tips to consider when striving to dress professionally and still beat the heat:

1. Consider lightweight fabrics. Choose natural fibers such as cotton, rayon, linen or silk. In addition, there are many synthetics that, when blended with natural fibers, greatly reduce wrinkling. The tropical weight wools, poplin and linen for men's suits, when combined with lighter colors such as tan or taupe, often feel cooler, especially in the

hot, humid summers in Louisiana and Texas.

2. Avoid the "bare" look. Ladies, here are a few office attire no-no's: halter and strapless tops, spaghetti-strap tops or dresses, low-cut blouses, midriff-baring outfits and anything too sheer or revealing. Generally, skirts shorter than two inches above the knee or too long (below the ankle), Capri pants, shorts and garments that are form-fitting are not appropriate. Unless your company's dress code specifies otherwise, jeans are also inappropriate for most offices. It's a good idea to hold up sheer garments in a well-lighted area. Tip: If you can "read" through the garment, don't wear it to work!

3. Pay attention to footwear. Flip-flops, slippers, sneakers and any type of beach shoe are definitely inappropriate for the business office. For a top-notch polished look, lace-up shoes or slip-ons with socks for men; pumps, sling-backs or either with a small "peep-toe" opening and hose for women. I know, I know — you're saying, what's with the hose thing? OK, hose can be optional. However, hose worn with your shoes automatically sets a business tone. I suggest you definitely wear them for that special meeting or presentation.

4. Consider your undergarments. Gentlemen, I suggest that you wear a white undershirt with your dress or polo shirts. Why, you ask? Because they help control perspiration. Make sure you purchase a properly fitting undershirt, so it has as few wrinkles as possible, and your outer shirt

drapes nicely. And, of course, briefs are mandatory. Choose a style that is comfortable and allows your slacks to fit properly.

Ladies — bras, slips and panties are also mandatory and they shouldn't show through your garments. (Nude or skin tone-colored fabrics work just great). We're talking perception and credibility here! If you have ever seen the movie, "Bridget Jones' Diary," you may recall when Bridget descended the office stairs in a sheer top that revealed a sexy-looking bra. Her boss, played by Hugh Grant, had anything but professional regard for her at that moment. Remember: we're about projecting professionalism, so dress the part — even underneath.

5. Remain professional. Even if your employer has an informal dress code, they still want you to look professional for the workplace environment and the duties you are performing. Make sure your clothes are clean and pressed, that your shoes are polished and in good repair.

A few final words: One of the most important points to remember is that the organization's image comes before your image. What you wear to the office should work for the greater good, not against it. In the end, business is still business, and you need to dress accordingly. So, no matter how long and hot the summer, as the adage goes, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression."

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