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Dress professionally, maintain credibility and stay cool

April is here. With the warm weather beginning to move in, now is the perfect time to discuss what to wear in order to stay cool while also dressing appropriately. While most companies have dress code expectations and policies based on geography, industry, organizational culture and customer contact, there are some general guidelines to follow.

Read ahead for six basic tips that will allow you to present a polished, professional image, reflect positively on the company and survive the sweltering summer heat.

1. Avoid the “bare flesh” look. Halter and strapless tops, tube tops, spaghetti-strap dresses, low-cut blouses, midriff-baring outfits, mini-skirts and anything too sheer or showing too much shoulder and cleavage are “no-nos” for a professional office setting. Though a cardigan or jacket may offset some items, it’s best to make sure your office attire consistently projects your credibility. Keep in mind, the more “flesh” you expose, the more distracting you can appear to customers and coworkers, which can ultimately impact your credibility and productivity.

2. Wear clothes that fit. Anything too tight, too loose and sagging, too short, too long, polos or dress shirts hanging out and sloppy looking are inappropriate in a business office environment.

3. Avoid being too casual. Leave the t-shirts, tank tops, cargo pants, leggings and shorts for the weekend. In some offices, even capris

and cropped pants are unacceptable. So, be sure you are aware of your dress code. And, your sunglasses sitting on your head are not a hair accessory, so please remove them while working in your office.

4. Consider your footwear. Flip-flops, slippers, sneakers, Crocs or any type of beach sandal do not send a professional message. For a better image, loafers or lace-up shoes with socks for men. For women, pumps and sling-backs with a closed, open or peep-toe, and conservative sandals with feet neatly pedicured are acceptable. Hose is optional, but I strongly recommend they be worn when attending special meetings or making a presentation in order to project a polished, professional appearance.

5. Consider fabrics and colors. Choose natural fibers such as cotton and linen/cotton/silk or rayon mixes. There are also many synthetics that, when blended with natural fibers, greatly reduce wrinkling. These fabrics work well in suits/jackets for both men and women. When combined with lighter colors such as tan, taupe and beige, these garments often feel cooler, especially in the hot, humid summers in the South.

6. Remember the ABCs of business dress. Diana Pemberton-Sikes, a wardrobe and image consultant, points out “regardless of how hot it gets or what others you work with wear, you represent both you and your organization.” Here are Pemberton-Sikes’ descriptions of the ABCs of business dress: “Appropri-

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ate clothes meld with both your work environment and the people with whom you interact. Always consider your line of work and your audience. By setting boundaries with how you dress, you’ll know your clothes always offer proper coverage. Make it a policy never to wear anything that would distract from the business at hand ... and, a consistent approach to business dress establishes trust and credibility for everyone with whom you interact.”

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Peter V. Handal, chairman of the board and CEO of Dale Carnegie Training, suggests that to avoid any problems, employers should have a clear dress code in place. “A good way of doing this is to include a list of examples of inappropriate garments within the policy,” he says. “While it may seem silly asking employees not to wear flip-flops or tank tops, it is not nearly as awkward as having to send someone home to change when he or she is dressed inappropriately. It may also be helpful for bosses to reiterate ‘if you have to think about it, then it is probably not appropriate.’”

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