

# FMJ



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## Back to Basics

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“ The Return of the Dress Code was the headline on a 2009 *Wall Street Journal* article. Is it true? Are some companies tightening their standards and calling for clothing that befits the workplace?

When did it become okay to leave the house looking as though we could barely manage to pull something on?

#### Excuses, excuses

This cannot be blamed on the vague but easy younger generation excuse. Boomers were the first to embrace a relaxed work environment and agreed that as long as the job got done, it didn't matter what people were wearing. In many cases, power dressing was seen as pretentious and affected, and liberation was proclaimed with giddy assertiveness.

We've completely forgotten the psychological reality that dressing like we mean business has an effect on us. We tend to act more professionally when we look the part. This is not a suggestion that those in the facility department, who put in a lot of hard work on duties that necessitate a more industrial uniform, should wear Armani suits while strolling construction sites or plant operations. But not all



# How Do I Look?

SUE THOMPSON



Companies slowly began to adopt what is now known as business casual (in an effort to prevent jeans and running shoes from becoming everyday wear), create their own relaxed uniforms (think Southwest Airlines), or take the plunge into a fully casual code where largely only beachwear or too-revealing clothing are prohibited. This was considered bringing freedom to the job environment workers could focus on work without restrictive and dogmatic rules about attire.

But here's where that kind of freedom has gotten us in today's workplace. Folks wear things in which they ought only to be caught doing yard work or changing the oil in their cars. Companies brand images project a professional, dedicated workforce but actual employees look as though combing one's hair is an optional grooming exercise.

facility personnel get dusty and dirty. Many work in a corporate atmosphere, expecting to be treated as a valued contributor to senior management. Some are directors and vice presidents who routinely participate in upper management activity. It is a significant disconnect when people who wish to be considered executive material zip about the office and show up at meetings dressed as though they'd given their appearance about 15 seconds of thought.

#### Possible explanations

Take a moment to look into the mirror and consider the messages you want to send by your appearance. In many cases, that message shouts louder than any work product.

- You're not important enough for me to dress appropriately for our meeting.
- I'm fine with barely getting by.
- I know I'm 45, but I'm sure I can convince you I'm 18.
- This sweatshirt I wear every single day is my safety blanket.
- I think this dog hair shows how much I care about living things.

People are so often ignorant of how they are perceived, or they dismiss what others think by saying, "I don't care." Stacy London, who along with Clinton Kelly hosts The Learning Channel's television show *What Not to Wear*, is often seen on camera with an incredulous look on her face as she asks, "And this is what you wear to work?"

In a *WSJ* column, Naomi Schaefer Riley noted that London is trying to slow what she calls the casualization of America. Ms. London and Mr. Kelly have had to lecture guests on why pajamas are not acceptable attire outside of the house. If I have to get dressed to go out in the morning, so do you, she tries to convince them.

Reporters who focus on career issues are fond of pulling the generational chord

insisting that as the Millennial generation floods the workplace, companies will feel compelled to relax dress codes to attract and retain these young workers. In fact, the opposite is true—many organizations are tightening dress codes, fighting the loose standards of college attire.

The sad truth is that most who show up for the workday disheveled and shabby believe they are dressed.

To be fair, there's no disputing it's our performance on which we should be judged, not the way we look. We want to be considered solely on our merits and, in most cases, supervisors do their best to keep their eyes on performance alone. The truth, however, is humans are wired to make judgments based first upon what the senses perceive—what can be seen, smelled, touched and heard. An often quoted statistic states we have only seven seconds to make a good first impression. Whether or not this is so, it's certainly true that a poor first impression can ruin chances for a second one, and a daily, ongoing, negative personal image is a daily, ongoing reinforcement to all who view us.

Our brains assess an entire package to make a judgment and, once made, it can take considerable work to provide evidence counter-

ing it. You don't want the boss to think twice about inviting you to dinner with the new board members because you don't look like you'd know how to act in a fine restaurant.

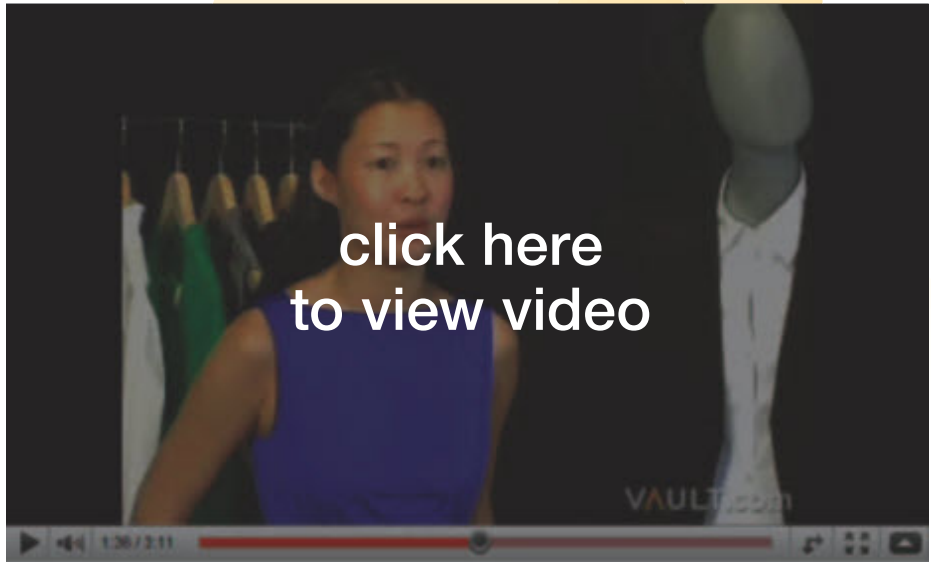
### Solutions

There are simple remedies that can be applied if you have an inkling that appearance may be hindering a favorable impression. They require a bit of effort but the results can be life-changing. First, if you've noticed someone at work who always looks polished and put-together, mirror their style or ask if they'll help. This can be extremely flattering.

As an alternative or an additional exercise, visit your local library, find the section with books on dressing for success and pour over them. Take an honest look at yourself and consider what it will take to match the pages before you. A new haircut? A session with a makeup artist? A trip to a department store?

If you really want to go the distance, invest in the services of an image consultant. These professionals can show you what looks right on you, what you should avoid, how to accentuate your best features and how to hide what should remain unseen. Don't fall into the "I don't wear X (suits, skirts, ties) because it's not comfortable" argument.





Great fitting clothes are comfortable allowing you to have the perfect fit.

**Dress for success**

Remember that this is not about trying to become a fashion plate. It's simply about looking like you count, appearing as though you care and projecting confidence about what you have to offer.

It's time to dress for success. **FMJ**



Sue Thompson brings her individual and corporate clients fresh perspectives on the importance of understanding temperament and talent, surviving difficult work environments and behaving like a professional. She is an etiquette trainer, image advisor and personality expert.

Thompson works with companies and executives to provide personal coaching, corporate training and project consulting. For more information, visit her blog at [www.etiquettedog.com](http://www.etiquettedog.com).

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