

smart casual

Putting the new professionalism to work in employee wardrobes this fall.

By Mary Lou Andre, President, Organization By Design, Inc. and Editor of Dressingwell.com.

The American workplace is much different than it was five years ago. Everything from corporate structure and hiring practices to work schedules and compensation has evolved. But these important areas are not the only marked differences in today's changing workplace.

The appearance of the American worker has changed as well. By the end of the last decade, everyone from the most seasoned professional to the entry-level employee was encouraged to put away their suits and ties and opt for a more relaxed approach to business dress. Khakis and polo shirts became the norm in even the most conservative industries. Yet the rules have changed again. Khakis are being paired as often with a blazer and a dress shirt as they are with polos. Furthermore, overly casual dress codes that were popularized in the dot-com heyday of the late '90's are as out of style today as many of the businesses that glorified them.

While the standard for business dress right now is indeed more buttoned up than a couple of years ago, there are still many casual options for professionals to choose from when deciding what to don for work. Consistency, respect and an eye for details that give your staff a competitive edge within your specific industry are key concepts for dressing for success in the new economy.

So how do you dress for work this fall in a way that sets you (and your company) up to succeed? Start by reading (and copying for your staff) our "Rules to live by" (right) and the "Fall fashion forecast" (far right).

Rules to live (and dress) by.

View your wardrobe as a business communications tool. Your outfit speaks volumes about your professionalism. Be sure it's creating the right impression. Whatever your style, make sure your clothes are wrinkle-free, in good repair, and pulled together with seasonally appropriate fabrics, and matching belts and shoes.

Set proper business boundaries through your wardrobe choices. Inappropriate dress is anything that distracts from the business at hand. Make sure your outfits provide proper coverage at the neckline and hemline. Women should think of wearing socks, nylons and closed-toe footwear as a way to create good boundaries, especially after Labor Day. For men, going without socks is never appropriate in a business setting.

Plan ahead. Before you get dressed in the morning and think about what the day holds. Going on a sales call or to an offsite meeting? You might have trouble connecting with your clients if you arrive in khakis and a sweater and everyone else is in a suit. Call ahead and ask about the dress code. Receptionists are becoming accustomed to answering such questions, and meeting planners have become savvier about defining dress codes for conferences.

Pack summer away. While white tee shirts are great for layering anytime and white dress shirts are excellent year-round staples, it's best to pack away white linens, shoes and sandals after Labor Day. The same guidelines apply to pastels and other light-colored linen and cotton clothes.



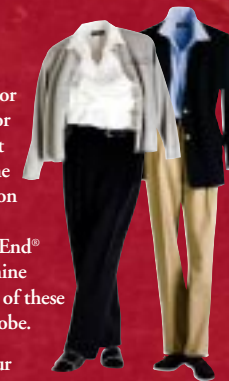
Ronnie from RadioShack.

Fall fashion forecast:

suggestions for building a stylish and affordable wardrobe this season.

For women:

• Start with at least one good suit in a dark neutral – black, navy, brown or gray. Pant suits are a practical choice for women interested in having pieces that can be easily dressed up and down. The leg of most current pant suits this season is slightly boot-legged. Plain front and pleated pants are both in style. Lands' End® is known for its comfortable and machine washable twill pants and skirts. Think of these basics as the foundation of your wardrobe.

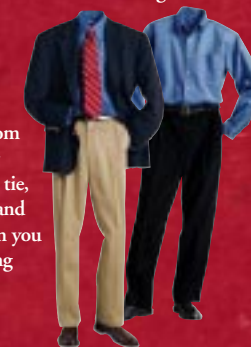


• Stock up on different tops to give your suits, blazers, pants and skirts versatility. Crisp cotton shirts in white and classic hues such as chambray and earthy greens add a casual element to a fall wardrobe. Soft heathers, aqua blues and rich wine colors are particularly popular this season and can instantly update a basic wardrobe.

• Twinsets (i.e. cardigan sweaters with matching shells) are also an easy way to present a softer look while still looking professional. The jewel-neckline featured on the shell of the Lands' End twinset is both business and lady-like.

• The easiest shoe color to incorporate into a professional wardrobe is black. A black dress pump and loafer in this color are good starters. An ankle boot with pants and long skirts can provide a fashion-forward look in the cooler months.

• Jewelry, scarves and other accessories complete an outfit and help you add a personal touch to your overall look. Be aware that less is often more in terms of accessorizing in a professional setting.



For men:

• Even if you work in a business casual environment, there is still room in a professional wardrobe for a few suits and jackets. With or without a tie, a jacket always sets a business tone and is a respectful garment to wear when you are meeting new clients or presenting in front of a formal group.

• A sport coat paired with a dark to medium color wool pant is always less formal than a suit. The affordable and sophisticated Lands' End Year'Rounder Blazer might be the single best investment you make in your career this season.

• The "buttondown" collar is the most common of all business shirts and is the easiest collar choice to wear without a tie. A collared knit top worn with or without a sports coat is another nice business casual option. Whether you prefer long or short sleeve styles this fall, you can't beat the range of styles available from Lands' End in both dress shirts and collared knit tops.

• For many men, shoes are an afterthought, but cheap or unkempt shoes can ruin an otherwise polished look. The best shoes for a traditional business suit are wingtips. Oxfords and loafers are better choices when wearing more casual clothes.



• The details do matter. Dark socks such as navy, black or brown are best. Over-the-calf socks are much better than shorter styles. Coordinating your belt with your shoes instantly pulls your look together.

Outerwear & business accessories.

Appropriate outerwear and a well-maintained briefcase or tote are essential finishing pieces for business outfits for both men and women and should not be an afterthought.

Clients and business partners are often meeting employees for the first time in lobbies, at off-site meetings and at trade shows. The outerwear they are wearing during these encounters is as important as what they have on underneath their coats when shaping that all-important first impression.

Lands' End has a variety of jackets, vests and pullovers that can complement the overall image of your company and its corporate identity program while helping employees complete their professional wardrobes.



The last word.

Companies are wise to communicate their expectations for a professional image through existing channels, such as employee newsletters, memos, and e-mails.

Post any dress policies you have on bulletin boards in high-traffic areas, such as the lunchroom, and reinforce your message with pictures whenever you can.

Don't forget the power of influence. When top managers dress in a suitable fashion, others will be more likely to follow their example.

Boston-based corporate image consultant Mary Lou Andre (dressingwell.com) has appeared on ABC, CBS and MSN television. Her firm, Organization By Design, Inc., has also been profiled on CNN. Her fashion and professional image insights are regularly featured in magazines such as Esquire, Executive Female and Sales & Marketing Magazine. She is currently under agreement with Penguin/Putnam to write "Ready to Wear: An Expert's Guide to Choosing and Using your Wardrobe" – March 2004.

