

10.3: Dress for Success

Learning Objectives

- Discuss how to dress for success for a sales presentation.

Your appearance communicates volumes about you before you ever open your mouth.

Tom Reilly tells the story of a salesperson that showed up to one of his recent seminars dressed in flip-flops and a T-shirt. “I thought he was there to clean the windows,” Reilly says. Tom Reilly, “Dress for Success,” Tom Reilly Training, 2009. You want your prospective customers to take you seriously at first glance, so pay careful attention to what you wear on your sales call. Think about it this way, when you are buying a product off the shelf in a store, isn’t packaging the first thing that catches your attention? Marketers know that packaging can influence a consumer’s decision to buy before she even researches the product or reads about its features. In the same way, your prospect will make a judgment about you based on the way you “package” yourself; a professionally dressed salesperson can have a huge influence on a prospect’s perception of him, his company, and the product he represents. “Dress for Success,” Sales Success Blog, November 29, 2006. Your appearance should convey professionalism, competence, and success. Most important, regardless of the dress code at your prospect’s business, be sure your appearance includes a smile. A smile is an instant rapport builder. No one wants to buy from someone who isn’t excited about the company or product he’s representing. Show your prospect that this isn’t just a job; it’s a passion.

Business Casual or Business?

When you are making a sales presentation at a company, remember the advice from Chapter 9 and dress one step above what you would wear if you worked at the organization. Ross Macpherson, “6 Keys to Making the Right Impression in an Interview,” *A Career in Sales*, 2002, www.acareerinsales.com/careerToolsDress4Success.aspx (accessed May 16, 2010). If you are ever unsure about a company’s standard dress code, *always* dress up. It’s easier to take off a jacket and tie than to put them on at the last minute. Geoffrey James, “Is ‘Dress for Success’ Still Mandatory?” BNET, January 22, 2009. However, if your prospect tells you the dress code beforehand, here are some general guidelines to follow.

Business Attire

For most of your business-to-business (B2B) sales situations, business attire will be the norm. For a while in the ’90s there was a trend toward more casual clothing in the workplace, but that trend is mostly on the way out. “I see a return to more traditional business wear,” says Gary Brody, president of the Marcraft Apparel Group. Paul Burnham Finney, “Redefining Business Casual,” *New York Times*, October 23, 2007. For that matter, even if your customer says business casual is the standard in his workplace, if you are aiming to dress a notch up from that standard, you might decide that business attire is the way to go. As Mark-Evan Blackman of the Fashion Institute of Technology says, suits “universally project an air of authority.” Paul Burnham Finney, “Redefining Business Casual,” *New York Times*, October 23, 2007.

For men, business attire means a suit (matching pants and jacket), a necktie, a long-sleeved shirt, and lace-up shoes. Go for conservative, dark colors such as gray, black, or dark blue for the suit; white or light blue for the shirt. For women, business means a suit (skirt or pants and matching jacket), shoes with moderate heels in a basic pump style (closed-toe), a blouse, and tan or light pantyhose.

Business Casual

Business casual can sometimes be tricky because it’s less clearly defined than business attire. According to Monster.com, business casual “means dressing professionally, looking relaxed, yet neat and pulled together. For men, a bare minimum approach to business casual means dress pants and a collared shirt. Women can wear skirts or pants, but skirts should be a conservative length, and pants should be well tailored: not too tight or too loose. On the top, a blouse or a tailored knit sweater are good choices, and for footwear, make sure to wear closed-toe shoes. Business casual for men or women does *not* include workout clothes or shoes, wrinkled clothing, worn blue jeans, shorts, miniskirts, athletic socks, or overly revealing clothing.

Best-Dressed Men



Details Matter

Getting the clothes right but missing the mark on the details will create a poor impression just as much as underdressing for the occasion can, so make sure everything from your nails to your hair and choice of accessories conveys professionalism.

- All clothes should be cleaned and pressed. Wrinkled or stained clothing looks very unprofessional. Take the time to review your wardrobe days before your presentation to be sure everything is cleaned and pressed. A trip to the dry cleaner is money well spent.
- If the garment has belt loops, wear a belt. Belts should be dark leather.
- Make sure your briefcase or handbag is professional, not casual.
- Men should avoid sports watches, and women should wear conservative jewelry—nothing flashy.
- Make sure your hair looks professional and well groomed.
- Carry a good quality portfolio or notebook and a nice pen.
- Women should wear hosiery if they are wearing a skirt. Avoid wearing perfume or cologne.

The Image Your Customer Wants

When employees whose businesses rent space in the Coca-Cola building on New York's Fifth Avenue want to bring a canned or bottled beverage to work, they have a list of drinks to choose from. Vermont Pure Water is OK, but Evian is definitely out. Food and drink orders coming into the building are scanned, and anything with non-Coca-Cola brand products gets sent away. While this rule is on the extreme side, it's true that even the products you use reflect an image, and when you're doing business with a potential customer, you want that image to be the right one. This is something worth researching before you go into your sales call. If you know who your prospect's customers are, use those company's products. Does the prospect do advertising for Apple? Don't listen to your Zune while you're waiting for the appointment. If your prospect is a publishing house, read some of their books before you go to your meeting. If they have a radio station or record label, listen to it. Knowing the prospect's products, or their customers' products, is part of your credibility.

Key Takeaways

- When you prepare for a sales presentation, pay careful attention to your appearance because this is an important part of your first impression.
- Always dress more formally than you think your customer will be dressed. When in doubt, dress up.
- Give careful attention to detail, such as accessories and grooming.
- Make sure to convey an image that's in line with your customer's products and values.

? Exercise 10.3.1

1. Review the clothes that are currently in your closet. Do you own a suit and accessories that would be appropriate for business attire? Do you have several pieces you could wear at a business casual event? If not, what will you need to purchase to dress for success?
2. Assume you are a salesperson for a financial services company and you are making a presentation to the vice president of operations and her staff about your corporate financial services. What would you wear?

3. Your prospect is sponsoring a team-building happy hour and dinner that is being held at a local restaurant and sports bar on a Thursday evening and has invited you to attend. What would you wear? Would you consider wearing jeans? Why or why not?
4. You have a meeting with your prospect on Friday at his office. The office is very casual, and your client usually wears jeans. What would you wear? Would you wear jeans? Why or why not?

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