

# Provocative Attire in the Workplace

by Sandy Dumont, Image Consultant

**H**ollywood glamour sells movies, but it may not do much for your career. According to Professor Peter Glick of Lawrence University, the sexier a woman dresses and the more prominent a position she holds within a company, the more negatively she's perceived. He adds, "If you play up your sexiness and you're in a more powerful position, you're going to get slammed for it as a woman." Glick also asserts that lower-level female employees who dress provocatively will get labeled as bimbos. Glick's theories are not just assumptions. He has done years of studies about gender bias.

Unfortunately, very few female executives seem to have read the reports of Glick's studies. A successful businesswoman I know reported that she confronted a longtime friend and associate about her exaggerated cleavage and the woman replied, "Everyone shows cleavage, so I figure it's part of the game plan for success." Feeling exasperated and shocked, she called me to discuss the incident. My friend considers cleavage to be vulgar in the workplace, and I agree.

Women might be surprised to learn that male CEOs also agree. When they hire me to do workshops about professional attire, they tell me that the thing they want to get rid of the most is cleavage. "We aren't selling that," they exclaim. They assert, and

rightly so, that provocative attire throws a negative light on the company.

Producers of popular TV shows seem to believe that the deeper the cleavage, the higher the ratings, so everywhere we look we are bombarded with sexy-looking stars. And the craze is not just for women. One popular fashion magazine for men recently decreed that the new look for men was snug-fitting skimpy suits with shorter jackets that expose the lower buttocks. Sorry, but "fashion" looks are not for the board room if you are a male because they look more like "going to Vegas." This includes "designer stubble" which actually gives men the appearance of being a "rake" or womanizer. Business professionals cannot afford to send out that kind of message.

Everywhere we look we are being bombarded with sexy-looking models and filmstars – male and female. The problem is that what is "in" for TV, films and fashion magazines isn't necessarily what conjures up images of credibility, power and professionalism in the boardroom.

The age-old axiom that I was taught at the John Robert Powers Fashion & Finishing School many years ago still applies,

and it is this: "Sexy is fine, but cheesecake is the kiss of death." The sexiest look in decades is still Yves St. Laurent's tuxedo pantsuit for women, which showcases the natural curviness of a woman's figure without looking cheesecakey or vulgar.



It isn't necessary to wear stilettos, short skirts or tight-fitting suits in order to look appealing. This is substantiated in Robert U. Akert's book "Photolanguage." Chapter Five is entitled "The Power of Seduction" and features a photo of what appears to be two very classy and elegantly-clad debutantes. It turns out they are strippers. Akert remarks, "In Freudian terms, the untouchable 'Madonna' becomes the willing-to-please 'whore,' resolving a fundamental male sexual ambivalence before men's eyes."

Giving in to the recent "culture of provocativeness" could mean that your future will have nowhere to go. Whether you are branding a product or yourself, one of the most important factors is credibility. You simply can't attach credibility to a provocative and vulgar persona, be it male or female.

Professor Glick says, "What's attractive in women sexually is really different

than what's required from the work role. Part of a woman's image when she dresses sexy is that she's there to be eye candy. That's really incongruent with what's required in a high-power job." One female executive said, "If you look in the mirror and say to yourself, 'Would I wear this to the bar on a Saturday night?' and the answer is yes, you shouldn't wear it to work. You want to stand out for good things you do. You don't want to stand out for a short skirt."

When you dress inappropriately, it is like playing Russian roulette with your future because both your authority and your credibility are questioned. And, conversely, if you are new to the workforce, the last thing you want to look like is a greenhorn who has no experience. However, wearing club attire such as lingerie-style camisoles, miniskirts, cleavage and tight-fitting pants has "teen" and "greenhorn" written all over it. No one wants to deal with an inexperienced employee because time is too valuable. No matter what your age and position in life, dressing inappropriately is the kiss of death for careers. ■

Sandy Dumont has 30 years' experience transforming the lives of others through exclusive image techniques. Contact her for more information about her image makeover workshops at [www.theimagearchitect.com](http://www.theimagearchitect.com)

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