Having Style Vs. Being In Style  

by Sandy Dumont

Having style is not the same as being in style. Having style implies that one is a creature of natural refinement and elegance. Being in style suggests that a person is dressed in the colors and styles of the moment—whether they are flattering or not. Fashion comes and goes with the whims and moods of the moment—often with little or no concern for the results in the mirror. Fashion victims from both sexes abound.

As Coco Chanel said, “Fashion passes. Looks remain.” Dressing “deliberately” with an acute awareness of the effects that every element of one’s persona will have on the observer is, very simply, the clever implementation of style. A command of powerful, yet subtle, image tools enables a person to control the reaction of others. It also dramatically increases self-awareness and self-confidence because it is empowering to know that one will always be seen as professional, polished, and classy.

In the past few months, most of the fashion magazines I subscribe to have featured alluring young Hollywood stars in lingerie-style, décolleté garments. Thinking this to be “in style,” hoards of young women throughout the country have taken to wearing lingerie-style tops to the office “as is” or under a business suit with the lace peeking out. Distressed clients have reported to me that some employees have begun wearing the lacy tops “as is,” without the jacket. Though “in style,” both looks are far from being professional. Indeed, they are quite provocative and should be reserved for activities outside the office.

In the world of fashion, a distinction has always been made between “sexy” and “cheesecake.” Basic difference? One is classy and the other is not. What looks sexy and classy on the cover of a fashion magazine does not translate to classy in the office. On the contrary, it looks suggestive and provocative, and it can destroy a person’s credibility.

According to Palm Beach psychotherapist Carol Waldenburg, women must leave sexiness at home or for after-work activities. She says, “Provocative dressing has no place at work and only demeanes you, in the eyes of both men and women, without your even knowing it.”

Managers are speechless when their young female employees show up with exposed navels, lacy camisoles, and tight jeans with stilettos. “Don’t they know that kind of attire is totally unprofessional?” one executive exclaimed. “If we permitted it, it would cause us to lose all credibility with our clients,” he continued. “We’ve had to send several young female employees home to change clothes.”

It appears that for the first time in decades, what is suitable for a professional office environment bears no resemblance to what is “in” and “with it.”

There has always been a need for separate wardrobes, one for the office and one for casual activities. After all, until the dot.com revolution and the Casual Friday phenomenon, no one expected to be able to wear jeans and a T-shirt to the office. The problem is that wearing casual clothes often means employees are likely to take their work casually. And provocative dress announces they may have something on their minds other than business.

Unfortunately, the “lapse” in office attire protocol has created belligerent employees who have forgotten that it has always been necessary to have professional attire and attire for golfing, clubbing, etc.

The outcome of dressing professionally is increased success in business. On the other hand, the outcome of dressing provocatively is an enhanced love life—two entirely different goals with entirely different “tools.” Gen-X and Gen-Y may balk at the idea of having two separate wardrobes, but that’s just the way it is. You simply won’t be taken seriously unless you look like you are serious about your job.

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