

To Bare or Not To Bare

by Sandy Dumont

The image question that I am asked most frequently from coast to coast is whether it is permissible to have bare legs in a professional setting during the hot summer months. The subject is hot (pardon the pun), and quite a number of women want to make some exceptions to the “rule” of wearing closed-toe shoes and stockings to work. If they are honest, women confess that the reason they opt for pantsuits in the summer, rather than skirted suits, is because they feel they can go *sans stockings* without looking unprofessional.

Not necessarily. For instance, if your legs are ultra white and you wear a dark pantsuit with dark shoes, your ultra-pale feet may turn out to be a distraction. This is particularly true outdoors. I decided to test this out for two days, and I was amazed at the number of times I caught people’s eyes riveted to the blue-white skin of my feet.

Here’s the thing. Stockings were invented to smooth out all the little flaws on a woman’s legs that inevitably become a distraction, including things like dark calluses, broken blood vessels, bulging veins at high arches, and blinking white feet! All these can be camouflaged by stockings.

But what if we could get rid of those little distractions by going to a tanning salon or a “spray tan” salon? That’s what women have been doing the past few years, and in New York City and Los Angeles,

it has been considered passé for years to wear stockings. In these glittery big cities, it is *de rigueur* for powerful and well-heeled (no pun intended) women to have silky-smooth “tanned” legs one way or another, and rarely thanks to stockings. These women show off their freshly manicured red toenails with slinky, strappy high heels from famous shoe designers. It’s become the uniform of women whose photos appear in celebrity magazines from coast to coast.

But there’s a factor that has been overlooked with this growing trend. According to a recent magazine survey (with photos), women who do not wear stocking are deemed flirtatious, even those in the most demure or conservative attire. So, bare legs carry a certain risk when worn in a professional setting. Flirtatious or suggestive attire will get you labeled a bimbo, according to university studies made by Wisconsin Professor Peter Glick.

Interestingly, when women complete questionnaires during an image makeover workshop, nearly every woman reports that she wants clothes that are comfortable. This is tied with the desire for clothing that slims. The majority of men say they want clothing that makes them look more businesslike and powerful. Clearly, our desire for comfort can be attained without looking less powerful. However, when it comes to shoes, this may not be true. So far, I haven’t seen any men in power suits with sandals and no socks.

This leads to the matter of summer shoes for women. Following close on the heels of the bare legs debate is the question about whether or not sandals and open-toed shoes are appropriate for business attire. In places like Arizona, California, and Florida, women tell me they choose comfort over propriety. They insist that only women in banking, finance, or law wear stockings and pumps. The East Coast Establishment, however, disagrees. Formal business attire demands formal foot attire—“celebrities” from NYC excluded apparently.

I don’t make the rules or invent the clothing or shoes in question. It is my job to report on the impact, or lack thereof, certain colors, styles, garments, or items make. It seems to me that women are all too quickly labeled less powerful, less competent, etc. For years, I’ve advised my female clients to level the playing ground by choosing hairstyles, clothing, and accessories that convey credibility,

authority, and power. I’m not so certain that giving in to comfort or glamour is a wise choice in a competitive or serious working environment.

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Don’t get me wrong. I cop out and wear pants out to dinner so I don’t have to wear stockings. And I also wear my sexy comfortable wedges with summer pants because it hasn’t escaped my attention that my white feet go

practically unnoticed at nighttime!

However, when I call on a prospective client, I dress professionally from head to toe. I know that when it comes to image, the devil is in the details, and that if one element is out of sync, that’s all that is remembered. I’m not so sure I want them to remember my feet! ■

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