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BUSINESS FORUM

Serious about your profession? Dress to make that impression

The dot-com revolution brought with it a new dress code as young millionaires with more money than style decreed suits were dead and ties were an abomination.

Money talks, and the fashion victims listened and followed. Casual Friday became de rigueur, even in the most conservative establishments. Once-formal bankers and investment brokers now loosened up on Fridays. In time, it became a bother to dress formally and "business casual" was born.

But change loomed in the air as headlines screamed of financial sleaze and scandals. In March 2002, Lehman Brothers in New York announced that business-casual attire was officially banned. The brokerage firm felt a more professional dress code would give clients an increased sense of trust and security.

They were right. True professionals know instinctively that in order to be taken seriously, a serious appearance is required. They dress to impress, even though this attitude may be more subliminal than conscious. Most people make an effort to impress when interviewing for a job or calling on an important client because they know it affects the outcome.

But what about the everyday encounter? Does it matter? You bet it does.

Presenting a too-casual appearance is tantamount to hurling an insult at the other person because it sends the message, "You don't matter much to me - I don't have to impress you." Or, your message without words may be interpreted as, "I'm not in a serious mood today - I'd



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rather be golfing." And if you're beginning to gray, it could be assumed your mind is more on retirement than your client's needs.

Corporate casual is dead. It does not give the competitive edge that is necessary in today's economy. Its origin should have been suspect to begin with, but it was so tempting to kick around in baggy khakis that we deluded ourselves.

The result of our brief foray into "madness" was the creation of "monsters" in the working environment. Outraged employees protest that they don't want to return to formal business attire. They love corporate casual and simply do not want to be bothered with dressing up again.

The problem with this attitude is that employees send the message, "My comfort is more important to me than impressing you with a professional look." Ultimately, the idea that employee preferences rate more consideration

than the customer must be examined.

The recent successor to corporate casual is the "in-your-face" dressing that announces, "I'm so hip and successful that I don't have to wear a tie." These professionals are commonly seen in a black silk Armani T-shirt and sport jacket. Other versions include inappropriate ties that suggest, "I'm so successful that I can wear Mickey Mouse or baby pink ties to the board room."

Beware of this stance. Menswear designer Joseph Abboud recently booted two investment bankers out of his New York office because they were not wearing ties. Abboud said, "They blew it because they offended me by being too casual."

When a person of the stature and power of Donald Trump takes an "in-your-face" stance and wears a pink tie, it sends the false signal that such a tie must be a Power Tie. It's not. Pastel ties are power ties only in Palm Beach. Of course, powerful men often live by the credo, "Do as I say, not as I do." In other words, for them, power trumps decorum.

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