

DRESS FOR DURESS

A Glossary of Personal Appearance Concepts

by Douglas B. Richardson

There you stand in your skivvies, assaying your closet for the right clothing choice for today's Big Job Interview. Yow, the stress. Last night your date reminded you that "you never have a second chance to make a first impression" just before you inverted your soup bowl into your lap. This morning you're still paranoid about torpedoing your employment prospects by choosing a suit or a dress that throws the interviewer into a jag of uncontrollable laughter.

The key to avoiding such a catastrophe is to borrow from the Hippocratic Oath what every med student is supposed to learn: "Above all, do no harm." In other words, the key to successful self-presentation isn't style, elegance, fashion or flair. It's to be above reproach, to understand what the interviewer expects and to project an impression of compatibility with those expectations. In short, the fundamental rule is: Be unremarkably remarkable.

In contrast to how you might dress for class, a date or a social gathering, you should be much less concerned with having your appearance make an individual personal statement. In interviews, your sartorial strategy is to show you understand and accept the interviewer's values, tastes and socioeconomic expectations about dress and demeanor.

The problem is that these expectations will vary by industry, job type and geography; what will fly in San Diego may not clear the runway in Philadelphia. Your interview preparation, therefore, should include some thought and research into an image that suggests you want to fit in, not stand out.

For example, people who manage money for others are expected to be conservative and to have that fact reflected in their appearance. Innovative, creative businesses tolerate and even welcome a more adventurous personal style.

Regardless of where you are or what you're interviewing for, there are some core attributes you want to project: cleanliness, attention to detail, credibility, authority, self-confidence. With these baseline virtues in mind, let's consider a glossary of sartorial concepts:

ASHEN: What the interviewer's face will be if you blow a heavy shot of your lunch-time Bermuda onions at him. Keep some breath mints in your attache or purse and assume you need them even if you have no reason to think you do.

BLOUSE: An expensive-looking item of women's business attire that doesn't shine too much, reveal too much or hide one's chin in an overabundance of frills. Can be set off nicely with a matching or contrasting bow, but tends to look sort of silly if matched with a man's necktie as a fashion statement. If you're short of money, buy expensive blouses and less expensive suits.

BROWN: A color occurring in nature and in golden retrievers but not generally indigenous to business and interview attire, at least in areas of the country where leaves fall off the trees in winter. A warm, friendly color

generally incapable of conveying the power, authority and go-for-the-jugular assertiveness crucial to becoming a successful takeover artist.

CONVENTIONAL: What the job market is. For better or worse, in the private sector (as opposed to the NBA or the Sausalito artists' colony), upper-middle-class norms prevail. Like it or not, your interviewing game face should suggest that you understand and accept what often are some pretty dreary and homogeneous expectations about personal behavior and dress.

COSTUME JEWELRY:

Costumes of any sort are for Halloween and the occasional toga party. Large jangly things hanging from your wrist or neck—no matter what the gold content—are distracting and look affected on either gender.

CLASS: Something that is conveyed through your poise,

articulateness, attentiveness and interpersonal skills. A positive attribute easily compromised if expressed through huge monograms, gold neck chains, chest hair peeping through an open-necked shirt, or even \$400 shoes. Class is as class does. You can't buy it with your VISA card.

FASHION: A concept the business community generally won't admit exists unless it's in the business of selling fashion to people who deny it exists.

GREEN: A color from which business clothing should not be made or worn unless

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