

Dress for Duress

Continued from page 25

you are a woman. For interviews, be safe: Wear blue or gray. Men: Golf-pro green is not really a shirt color. It's a statement of a fundamental character defect that only Jack Nicklaus can get away with. Better to stick with white or, in more informal settings, blue Oxford cloth shirts.

GUM: Moscow's largest state-owned department store. Also something you put in your mouth to freshen your breath, make yourself look bored and assure that you aren't hired by anybody.

HAIR: Your hair should look like you care about it, not that you spent too much or too little time caring for it. Note that your interviewer may not be able to distinguish the currently popular disheveled hair styles from merely disheveled hair.

IDENTITY ENHANCERS: You're supposed to be grown up now, with a sense of personal confidence and identity that does not rely on Messrs. Gucci, Lauren, Givenchy or Countess Mara for a boost. Except in areas where everyone wears them to signal group membership, avoid clothing or accessories that seek to make a statement: "I'm rugged," "I'm rich," "I'm classy," "Me 'n' Mr. Polo groom our ponies together," "I'll play in your league but show my independence through the buckskin fringes on the chaps I wear to work." They're hiring you, not Don Johnson.

IRISH SPRING: A soap, not a season. Sorry to go into this, but impeccable personal hygiene (includes nails and close shaves and stuff like that) reflects the attention to detail that speaks volumes about you. The interview season is not the time to save hot water.

LAPSEL: A part of a man's suit that should be no wider than his necktie. No firm rule in the women's league yet.

MALLOY: The guy who wrote *Dress for Success*, the prescriptive book on personal presentation everyone loves to laugh at. Except he's right. Men: Buy yourself a copy and keep it hidden in the garage. Women: His women's dress-for-success book seems far less helpful, probably because the conventions for women's business dress are still evolving

and Malloy doesn't know any more about them than you do.

NECKTIE: (1) A decorative item of male apparel that should be made of silk, no wider than your lapels, and unobtrusive. Patterns should be subtle and repetitive. Stripes should be of a uniform pattern, and not a lot of different widths and hues. (2) An item not to be bought at K-Mart.

PERFUME: Not so as you'd notice.

POLYESTER: It's wonderful stuff, but you and the entire business world are obliged to pretend that it doesn't exist. Save your unwrinklable unshrinkable indestructible polyester stuff for after you're employed or are traveling. Dweebs, nerds and biophysicists may ignore this injunction; employers in their fields are too intelligent to care what someone's clothes are made of.

RINGS: (See: Costume Jewelry.) A wedding ring is nice (if you're married)—shows home, health and all those stable values employers like so much. Diamond pinky rings play better in Vegas than in corporate America.

SHOES: Yes, you should wear some. If you do, men, it's black or cordovan, preferably with laces, at least in the northern states. In the South and the West Coast, the rules are bit more relaxed. But skip the Hush Puppies and the brown penny loafers.

Women—your shoes should be sensible, understated. Long spike heels send the wrong signal, unless you're interviewing for an exotic dancer position.

SOCKS: (1) A black or very dark navy blue bit of camouflage that keeps any part of your ankle, shin or calf from being visible to the human eye (in warmer climates lighter tones may be acceptable, but flashing skin never is). (2) A gag item, manufactured in many festive patterns and colors and given to people for Christmas with the clear intention that they never be worn except to rake leaves.

SMOKING: Are you kidding? Go straight to unemployment.

STOCKINGS: Should be flesh-toned, or close to it. Avoid colors, texture and patterns that could cause your interviewer to break eye contact.

WATCH: A device strapped to your wrist that should not weigh more than your shoe, utter strange urps and beeps during the interview or suggest that you place a higher priority on timing your splits in the triathlon than catching the local tram. Gold is nice. Round is nice. Thin is nice. Dummy Rolex knock-offs create a problem: If this is your first job and you're eager to start building a corporate career, where'dja get that \$8,000 watch?

WOOL: God's gift to corporate American clothing in the Rust Belt. Up North, every suit you wear should look like it's made

from it, unless it's July and 100 degrees, when something lighter may do. Poly/wool mixes are all right as long as the end result would make a ewe baah in recognition. In warmer climates, practicality wins out—but the suiting still should look professional and businesslike.

WOMEN: A major challenge to the equanimity of the male-dominated, basically chauvinistic and inflexible protectors of the American corporate flame and its time-worn clothing conventions. Should they pretend they're men? Dress like men? Be accepted as living, breathing, thinking organisms with minds and clothing standards of their own?

This much seems clear: What is regarded as an acceptable uniform on a male may look like a costume on a woman. Women seem to be able to wear different fabrics, more colors and more ruffles than men without appearing unprofessional. But where is the line drawn—and who draws it? The interviewer knows.

Generally, stay clear of either hyper-masculine (chalk-stripe suits, men's neckties in half-windsor knots) or hyper-feminine affectations (six-inch heels, a plunging decolletage). They'll get attention, all right, but probably not the right kind.

If all blue serge and no flair makes Jack a dull boy, remember that you'll have a lot more freedom to express your individuality after you've survived the interview and won the interviewer's trust. Regardless of where you live or the kind of job you're interviewing for, the same principle applies: Your clothing, like your demeanor, should appear unaffected, unstudied and a natural extension of you—not the other way around. The most vocal proofs of your strengths should come from your mouth, your resume and your cover letter, not your loafers.

Mr. Richardson is a career development consultant based in Philadelphia.

