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A monthly column co-authored by Michelle L. Collins, PhD & Julie K. Richie, MBA

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## Communicating With Your Wardrobe

First impressions can be daunting to overcome. Within 15-30 seconds of meeting somebody, that person has made assumptions about your educational level, personality, social heritage, integrity, career success and sense of humor. If you aspire to have a higher salary or promotion, you need to do more than just excel at your job (although that is, of course, the price of entry.) When it comes to moving up, appearance matters. This issue of *Leadership Her Way*™ will discuss the problems with underdressing at work, give some tips for dressing professionally and give specific examples of what to wear for four different work scenarios.

### Pitfalls of Underdressing at Work

- 1. Missed opportunities** – One non-profit employee escorting important donors to a new construction site dressed down for the occasion because she was going to have to walk across a bridge that wasn't finished yet. But the donors wore "shiny black suits" and when a Time magazine reporter asked the employee to be in the picture with the two donors, the donors asked to be in the picture by themselves. What a missed PR opportunity for both the non-profit and the employee!
- 2. Potential for embarrassment** – What if the VP of your department happens to be at the building sharing an elevator with you and you're wearing flip-flops? What does that say about your respect for your job and for the company?
- 3. Not being taken seriously** – According to one executive, "when I'm in the elevator, I can tell by what people are wearing who's getting off at the lower floors and who's getting off at the high floors. The most professionally dressed are getting off on the top floors where the executive offices are."
- 4. Communicating the wrong message about the company** - Remember, you represent Frito Lay. Your wardrobe choices tell others about what kind of company Frito Lay is.



*"Once the first impression is made, it is virtually irreversible."*

—Michelle T. Sterling, AICI,

Founder of Global Image Group

and expert on image, impression and impact.

### SUGGESTED READING

*The New Professional Image: Dress Your Best for Every Business Situation.*  
By Susan Bixler and Nancy Nix-Rice. Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2005.

*What You Wear Can Change Your Life.*

By Trinny Woodall and Susannah Constantine. NY, NY: Penguin Group, 2005.

### WEB SITES

[www.eileenkelley.com](http://www.eileenkelley.com)

Professional women's clothing boutique with onsite tailoring. Studio located at 1330 Hi Line Dr., Dallas, TX 75207. 214-746-75207. 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Tu. and Thu., 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Fri., Sat. by appointment.

[www.nkbuyrequest.com](http://www.nkbuyrequest.com)

Nancy Klompus – style consultant specializing in wardrobe management.

[www.neimanmarcus.com](http://www.neimanmarcus.com)

Free personal shopper services.

[www.nordstrom.com](http://www.nordstrom.com)

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# Leadership Her Way™

page 2

## 6 Professional Dress Tips

According to Eileen Kelley, owner of Eileen Kelley, a full-service Dallas clothing boutique known for “perfect pants for any body type in the best fit and the best fabric,” professional women have long been at a disadvantage. Have you ever been shopping with a man? They choose their suit or pants and head right over to the tailor in the same store. Women don’t usually get the same treatment. “Our concept is borrowed from the men’s market. We offer our product in every size that is 90 percent finished. Our tailor is onsite to make alterations. We focus on pants and we have a variety of fabrics that can be ordered,” said Kelley. Here are her professional dress tips for women:

- 1. Make sure your pants and skirt drape properly.** If there is any pulling, your fabric can’t slide a little when you bend over, or your pockets don’t lay flat, go up a size.
- 2. Wear skirts and skirt suits if you’re athletic** or have great legs. Wear pants if you’re pear shaped, short, or have thick calves. A skirt can segment you in the wrong places otherwise. Pants elongate legs and hide thick calves.
- 3. Ignore fashion trends.** Wearing trendy clothes is associated with frivolity.
- 4. Feel comfortable in what you wear.** If you only have 15 seconds to make a first impression you want to focus on eye contact and not be wincing or sitting a certain way so your skirt doesn’t pull or ride up.
- 5. Make sure the focus is on your eyes and hands.** Men do this with cufflinks and neckties. Women can do the same by wearing a nice watch, a ring or two and earrings that bring out the color of your eyes.
- 6. Check with HR about dress code policy** and preferences of top executives. Chances are the policy was formed by the preferences of a top manager.

## What to Wear

Style consultant Nancy Klompus specializes in wardrobe management and will be featured in *D Magazine* in August. Here is what she would have professional women wear in the following situations in a business casual culture:

### PRESENTATION TO EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

- Properly fitting undergarments so movements to compensate don’t come across as “tics.”
- Properly fitting suit in basic color: if budget allows, St. John Knit is suggested.
- Minimum jewelry, other than earrings, so all attention is on your face.
- Closed-toe shoes in same color as suit. Sling backs ok if strap stays in place.

### A MEETING WITH COLLEAGUES AND PEOPLE ABOVE YOU

- Your outfit should reflect the requirements of those above you.
- A softer cotton suit or twin set with trousers is a good choice. The key is quality. Sweaters should not be pillied, pants not too low.
- Don’t skimp on shoes or handbag. A fabulous pump or boot can make all the difference

### AN OFFSITE RETREAT WITH TEAM MEMBERS

- No shorts, tank tops, or anything that would make coworkers uncomfortable. You don’t want to give people a reason to talk about you negatively.
- Wear pants or a soft skirt and a cardigan buttoned just so over a fitted cotton shirt or jewel neck tank.
- Never wear mules with a skirt!
- Small earrings and a classic necklace or scarf finish your look.

### CASUAL FRIDAY

- No shorts, tank tops, or anything that would make coworkers uncomfortable. You don’t want to give people a reason to talk about you negatively.
- Accessories should not say “drinks with the girls.”
- Jewelry should be elegant and in control.

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