

Clothes Call: Your Professional Image Can Have a Big Impact on Your Career

As a skilled food and nutrition professional, you might think your education, training, and experience speak for themselves when it comes time for an interview, a review, or a promotion, but that's not necessarily true according to a recent [CareerBuilder.com](#) survey. The survey—conducted among 2,765 employers during early 2008—found that 41% of employers thought that people who dress better or more professionally tend to be promoted more often than others in their organization (1). A similar survey conducted by Yahoo! HotJobs and Banana Republic a year prior found that a majority of the general workforce (68%) and of human resource professionals (82%) agree that the way employees dress at work directly affects their prospects for a promotion (2). Interestingly, 61% of the employees polled in the Yahoo! HotJobs/Banana Republic survey—which collected data from more than 1,400 employees and 750 human resources professionals—admitted that they either didn't know, or didn't care, about their company dress code, and while they confirmed that maintaining a professional appearance was a top priority, they chose to express themselves in business casual and comfortable styles (2). What do all of these survey results mean for dietetics professionals who function in a variety of settings from face-to-face consultations, to clinical environments, to public or television appearances?

According to Susan Morem, a leading career consultant and author of *How to Gain the Professional Edge*, 2nd edition, “fair or not, employees—including food and nutrition profes-

sionals—are often judged by their clothing even before they have a chance to open their mouths to speak.”

“Being well groomed and wearing appropriate clothing is evidence that you take yourself and your job seriously. Don't give people a reason to underestimate your ability,” advises Morem, who has been featured in *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and on CNN.

This statement may be especially true for practitioners in the medical community. In an article titled “Physicians, Their Appearance, and the White Coat” published in the September 2008 issue of *The American Journal of Medicine* (3), Amir Kazory, a member of the Association of Professors of Medicine, makes the following observation: “The majority of studies evaluating the potential influence of appearance of a physician on a patient's perception have found that patients do care about their physician's appearance and might inadvertently use it to measure a physician's competency and credibility.”

FOLLOWING SUIT: LET THE SETTING SET THE STYLE

Jean R. Caton, MS, RD, MBA, a business and lifestyle coach and speaker, and [Christine M. Palumbo, RD, MBA](#), a Director-at-Large for the American Dietetic Association and a nutrition communications consultant, offer guidance for selecting suitable attire for three situations that food and nutrition professionals often encounter throughout the course of their careers. For face-to-face consultations, Caton says it is important to “think about your image and what you want to say to your patient. It may be that you want your patient to feel confident that you ‘know what you are talking about’ and that the patient can trust you to help them with their dietary issues. Then decide what that

looks like in the form of attire. If you are a pediatric dietitian that may be very different than if you work in a teaching hospital in a highly specialized clinical research unit. There are no firm rules that apply to every situation.” [Palumbo](#) advises dietetics professionals to “dress in a professional, yet approachable manner, for face-to-face consultations. “If a patient cannot relate to your appearance he or she may have difficulty relating to your educational message.” Due to the close physical proximity of these consultations, [Palumbo](#) also emphasizes the importance of personal grooming. “For women, fingernails should be an appropriate length (no longer than 1/8 past the finger tips), smoothed, and buffed. Chipped nail polish should be removed. Nail art and extreme polish colors have no role in the professional workplace.”

For a clinical setting, such as a hospital or outpatient clinic, [Palumbo](#) suggests possibly wearing a lab coat over street clothes. “In that case, a freshly laundered lab coat looks crisp and professional. A well-tailored blouse or sweater and dress slacks that fit well with comfortable shoes says, ‘I care about what I look like.’” In settings where a lab coat is not worn, she suggests similar attire or a blazer over a blouse or shell with a skirt or dress slacks. For clinical settings, Caton says that good common sense is key. She advises dietetics professionals to be “conservative, spotless, and professional in all aspects” and to think of successful attire as the total package, from hair to heels.”

For a public presentation or media appearance, Caton says the same general rules apply. She suggests that dietetics professionals conduct some research beforehand to determine the audience and audience expectations. For television appearances, [Palumbo](#) points to the traditional rules regarding attire (solid colors, minimal jewelry),

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but she also warns that conservative outfits on TV can read as “un-hip.” “Take a cue from the station’s anchors and reporters. It’s usually okay to wear a moderate print, perhaps some bold jewelry to jazz things up and add a little style to your look.”

For all three situations, both Caton and Palumbo assert that it is important to let the situation dictate your wardrobe choices.

THE INTERVIEW SUIT MAKES A COMEBACK

One situation that inevitably faces all dietetics professionals no matter what setting they work in or where they are in their career is the interview. An article in the November 12, 2008 issue of *The New York Times* titled “The Return of the Interview Suit” announced a “detectable shift in the way people are dressing for work” and cited the high unemployment rate as a determining factor for the rise in popularity of somber, serious suits for both women and men, especially individuals looking for a new job—or competing to hold on to jobs they already have (4).

Caton appreciates the merits of traditional interview attire, but she is also quick to point out that a formal suit may make you “appear out of sync” if you are interviewing for a position in an organization with a very casual corporate culture. “The best advice is to do a little research about the organization and its culture using online resources and personal contacts. Identify the typical work attire for the position you seek and then dress it up a notch or two.”

“Most people have an idea of what professional dress is,” notes Morem. “For men, it’s usually a dark suit and tie, but for women it can be everything from a suit to a dress to a skirt or slacks. The media, retailers, and fashion magazines dictate their ideas about what professional dress should be, but rarely do these mediums pin down what works in business. The styles shown are often too tight, too short, or too trendy. What works best is simple, well-tailored clothing in neutral colors.”

According to Morem, the following list (in order of professional appearance) are the best options for women and men (5):

Women (from most professional to most casual):

- Two-piece matching skirted suit
- Two-piece matching pantsuit
- Skirt with blouse/top and jacket
- Business dress with jacket
- Slacks with blouse/top and jacket
- Business dress with or without sweater
- Skirt and blouse or sweater set
- Slacks with blouse or sweater set
- Slacks with sweater
- Casual pants with casual shirt or sweater

Men: (From most professional to most casual):

- Two-piece matching suit, shirt, and tie
- Slacks with shirt, tie, and blazer
- Slacks with shirt, tie, and sport coat
- Slacks with shirt and tie
- Slacks with shirt, tie, and sweater
- Slacks, shirt, and sport coat
- Slacks with sweater
- Casual pants with sweater
- Casual pants with long-sleeved shirt
- Casual pants with short-sleeved shirt

CASUAL CAN BE CONFUSING

What began as a once-a-week benefit for employees (“Casual Friday”), Business Casual attire has grown to an everyday occurrence for many organizations—although the tides are changing and many offices now prohibit denim and other nonprofessional attire, especially for employees that interact with clients, customers, or patients. In “Physicians, Their Appearance, and the White Coat,” a study cited in the article featured patients who were shown a male and female physician in different articles of clothing and asked them to rank them from the most to least preferred doctor. The different styles of dress included casual, jeans, semiformal, white coat, and formal suit. In this study, the least preferred clothing was jeans; the most preferred clothing was semiformal followed by white coat (3).

The question really is how do you define “business casual” and “casual Friday,” says Caton. “It once meant professional, comfortable, and casual clothes. It soon became sweats, flip-flops, and outfits that could be mistaken for pajamas. Trendy, relaxed, comfortable clothes are fine, but this

does not mean you should wear something that you’d paint the deck in or go to the gym in.”

“A casual dress code is not the equivalent of not having any dress code,” notes Morem. “Keep in mind the following: You are always better off slightly overdressed than terribly underdressed—always dress better than you need to. It’s the best insurance against projecting the wrong image and, whether you realize it or not, people will notice and you will be rewarded for your efforts.”

“Having a moderately professional jacket in your office is a great safety net,” advises Caton. “Put on that jacket over any casual outfit when that unexpected meeting is called with senior management and you are good to go.”

ABOUT FACE: FOR MEN, GROOMING IS KEY

“Dressing professionally is essential to making our nutrition messages stick,” says Stephen Roch, RD, LDN, CFT, chair of the National Organization of Men in Nutrition, “and good hygiene is very important to maintain and improve a professional image.” Roch says male dietetics professionals “should have a clean-shaven face, maintain facial hair, have well kept nasal/ear hairs, and hair should be maintained, trimmed and organized.” If the skin is prone to oil, maybe ad a little powder, suggests Roch, who also encourages men to have fingernails well maintained and perhaps consider getting regular manicures. Roch says earrings and piercings, worn in a work environment, are not appropriate.

While professional attire may be generally easier to determine for men (slacks, shirt, tie, and dress shoes) Roch says there are some definite wardrobe “do’s” for the male dietetics professional:

- Do color-coordinate wardrobe
- Do wear loafers or a rubber-soled shoe
- Do wear a name tag or photo ID in plain view on the top half of your body
- Do button shirt to the neck
- Do wear a belt
- Do cover any body art
- Do wear matching socks

As for tips for men dressing in a

female-dominated profession, Roch borrows a quote from the Army, “Be All You Can Be.” “Always dress ‘up to’ any occasion. If male RDs and DTRs handle themselves in a professional manner and with integrity—doors will open for us in the future.”

PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

“Professional image, often referred to as ‘executive presence,’ may be hard to define, yet most of us ‘know it when we see it,’” observes Canton. “It is that indefinable impression that some people create when they walk into a room or meeting.”

No matter where you are in your career or what setting you work in, “dressing for success” means taking an inventory of who you are as a dietetics professional and making sure those traits and characteristics are reflected in your image and physical appearance every day.

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