

Clarifying professional image expectations in the workplace

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. The same is true about your professional image in the workplace. You have one opportunity to make an excellent first impression, and every subsequent interaction will continue to shape that impression.

Whether you are advising employees on what to wear to an event or at the office, clear workplace dress code can help everyone meet and exceed expectations.

Providing Dress Code Guidelines

Using terms like "casual" and "formal" to describe the dress code is relative to each person and their experience.

Business casual for some might mean jeans and a dressy top while for others, jeans aren't permissible at all. Business formal to one person could mean a black suit while another might sport a colorful suit to the event.

If the dress code guidelines are not clear, it can leave employees unsure of the best outfit choice. That can lead to an embarrassing moment if the wrong decision is made.

It's not a good idea to assume everyone will have the same interpretation of the label. Instead you should explain the expectation for their professional image with examples of what to wear and what not to wear.

For example, if there is a luncheon with a business casual dress code, you can provide the following explanation to ensure everyone is on the same page.

Dress Code for Tuesday's Luncheon: Knee-length skirts, dresses, slacks and capris with a dressy top, sweater or turtleneck are appropriate. Jeans, shorts, workout attire, and t-shirts are not permitted. Suit and tie optional.

This type of explanation should clarify the dress code expectations as opposed to just stating that the luncheon is business casual.

Dress Code Examples

The appropriate dress code to portray a professional image will depend on your line of work and the specific occasion. Here are three standard dress code labels and examples of clothing choices that might be appropriate and inappropriate depending on your corporate culture.

Business formal dress code

Business formal attire puts forth the ultimate image of power. The standard outfit is a full matching suit in muted colors like black, navy, and gray.

Bottoms

Appropriate Bottoms:

- Slacks that match a suit jacket

Inappropriate Bottoms:

- Jeans
- Sweatpants
- Shorts
- Overalls
- Leggings
- Exercise pants

Dresses and Skirts

Appropriate Dresses and Skirts:

- Skirts with a slit that hits at or below the knee
- Dresses and skirts that are comfortable to sit in
- Dresses and skirts that pair with a suit jacket

Inappropriate Dresses and Skirts

- Sundresses
- Beach dresses
- Spaghetti-strap dresses
- Short skirts and dresses
- Tight skirts and dresses

Tops

Appropriate Tops:

- Dressy shirts and tops
- Sweaters
- Turtlenecks
- Suit jackets to match suit bottoms

Inappropriate Tops:

- Tank tops
- Midriffs
- Tops with offensive words, logos, pictures, cartoons, slogans
- Halter-tops
- Tops that show your bare shoulder, back or excess cleavage
- Sweatshirts
- T-shirts
- Polo style shirts

Footwear

Appropriate Footwear:

- Dress shoes
- Oxfords
- Loafers
- Dressy Boots
- Flats
- Dressy heels

Inappropriate Footwear:

- Casual open toe shoes
- Athletic shoes
- Flip-flops
- Slippers

Business casual dress code

Business casual is a standard way of displaying a professional image in most companies today and is generally accepted by employees and upper management alike. However, the lines of what is considered business casual can get blurry, so it's essential to develop a clear definition to fit the corporate culture.

Bottoms

Appropriate Bottoms:

- Slacks
- Dressy capris

Inappropriate Bottoms

- Jeans
- Shorts
- Sweatpants
- Exercise pants
- Overalls
- Leggings

Tops

Appropriate Tops

- Casual shirts
- Dress shirts
- Sweaters
- Turtlenecks
- Suit jackets
- Sports jackets

Inappropriate Tops:

- Tank tops
- Midriffs

- Tops with offensive words, logos, pictures, cartoons, slogans
- Halter-tops
- Tops that show your bare shoulder, back or excess cleavage
- Sweatshirts
- T-shirts

Dresses and Skirts

Appropriate Dresses and Skirts:

- Casual styles
- Skirts with slits that hit at or below the knee
- Skirts and dresses with a length that allows you to sit comfortably

Inappropriate Dresses and Skirts:

- Very short skirts and dresses
- Very tight skirts and dresses
- Skorts
- Sundresses
- Beach dresses
- Spaghetti-strap dresses

Footwear

Appropriate Footwear:

- Loafers
- Clogs
- Conservative sneakers
- Boots
- Flats
- Dressy heels
- Leather deck-type shoes
- Conservative walking shoes

Inappropriate Footwear:

- Flip-flops
- Slippers
- Open toe shoes
- Shoes with flashy designs and colors

Smart casual dress code

Smart casual is the newest trend in showcasing a professional image that allows you to bring a bit of personality to your wardrobe while remaining professional. It's a less formal style than business casual, but more formal than casual wear.

Tops

Appropriate tops:

- Collared shirts
- Dressy shirts,
- Semi-dressy sweaters
- T-shirts if paired with a suit jacket
- Casual neckties
- Blazers
- Cardigans
- Patterns and textures that are professional yet stylish

Inappropriate tops:

- Tank tops
- Midriffs
- Tops with inappropriate words, terms, logos, pictures, etc.
- Halter-tops
- Tops that bare shoulders, back or excess cleavage
- Sweatshirts

Skirts and Dresses

Appropriate Dresses and Skirts:

- Casual styles
- Dresses and skirts with slits that hit at or below the knee
- Dresses and skirts that allow you to sit comfortably
- Colors, patterns, and textures that are professional yet stylish

Inappropriate Dresses and Skirts:

- Very short styles
- Skorts
- Sundresses
- Beach dresses
- Spaghetti-strap dresses

Bottoms

Appropriate bottoms:

- Plain jeans with no holes or rips
- Slacks
- Capris
- Patterns and textures that are professional yet stylish

Inappropriate bottoms:

- Shorts
- Exercise attire
- Sweatpants
- Overalls
- Jeans with holes, rips, stains, etc.

Footwear

Appropriate Footwear:

- Loafers
- Clogs
- Conservative sneakers
- Boots
- Flats
- Dressy heels
- Leather deck-type shoes
- Conservative walking shoes
- Dressy open toe shoes
- Patterns and textures that are professional yet stylish

Inappropriate Footwear:

- Flip-flops
- Slippers
- Shoes with flashy designs and colors

Whether the recommended style is business casual, business formal, smart casual, resort casual, or any of the other labels used to describe the workplace dress code, a label alone is not enough. Everyone wants to portray a professional image while involved in work-related activities and functions. Outlining the proper dress code is an essential part of business etiquette so a professional tone is set during every interaction. To learn more business etiquette tips, you can [download our free guide](#) on setting a professional tone with co-workers, clients and customers.