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SUMMER ASSOCIATES

DECODING Summer DRESS CODES

Use **COMMON SENSE** and keep the **'BUSINESS'** in **'business casual,'** and you'll have a good chance of **IMPRESSING** your firm with **LEGAL WORK** rather than with **FASHION** statements.

BY JANE RUE WITTSTEIN

If it's summer, the dress code must be "business casual." A by-product of the dot-com bubble that has long since burst, business casual dressing is no passing fad. At most law firms in Manhattan, collars are loosened and suits are shed from Memorial Day to Labor Day. To anyone who has endured the dog days of a New York summer in full business garb, sweltering on the subway and arriving at the office in need of a shower, this is welcome news.

But summer associates, beware: while "business casual" is a combination of two plain English words, both with simple meanings, defining the dress policy has defied many a fashion scholar. In fact, most firms prefer not to detail the policy in writing, taking the late Justice Potter Stewart's approach toward obscurity: we may not be able to define "business casual," but we know it when we see it.

With the downturn in the economy, law students will be working hard to make the best possible impression this summer. So for the 2003 wave of summer associates, here's help for avoiding the fashion faux pas of past trend-setters. Being appropriately dressed may not guarantee success, but this is not the summer to be the poster-child for why business casual policies should be revoked.

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Guiding Principles. The key to business casual is to keep the emphasis on "business," not "casual." You are a professional in a business office, and should be dressed in a manner that would allow you to be introduced to a client or senior partner at any time. This does not mean that to be on the safe side, you should wear a business suit every day. To the contrary, most firms that have adopted a business casual dress code, either in the summer or year-round, view it as an important part of the culture. As in many aspects of legal practice, you are called upon to exercise your judgment and discretion.

Dos and Don'ts. Let's start with what should be obvious. Unless it's blessed by the managing partner in writing and the routine practice of every lawyer in the firm, don't wear jeans (of any color), gym shoes, t-shirts, athletic attire, beachwear, casual sandals, sundresses, midriiffs, halters or shorts to the office. Even if you see some lawyers flouting these rules, don't decide you can, too. You have no idea what a lawyer's standing is within the firm, and even if you do, what is okay for the partner bringing in business or the associate pulling back-to-back all-nighters may not be a good idea for you.

Next, don't confuse relaxed dress standards with relaxed attention to your personal appearance. Being known as the "one with the

personal hygiene problem” is never a good thing. The same goes for one- or two-days’ beard growth, body jewelry, and hair colors not seen in nature — your appearance during business hours should mirror the firm’s image, not make a personal fashion statement.

Finally, don’t think that your wardrobe should be your ticket to getting noticed. While most firms are not looking to squelch your identity, you don’t want to make yourself memorable by being the summer associate who dressed inappropriately.

Now for the “dos”. You will find it hard to go astray if you remember that all summer, you are basically in “interview” mode. This means arriving at work well-dressed and on time. Check to see if your firm has a written dress policy, and if there is one, follow it to the letter. The “no logo” policy may be in place to keep you from showing up to a meeting with Calvin Klein wearing a Polo shirt.

You should also keep a business suit (plus matching shirt, tie, hosiery, shoes) on hand in case you get a last-minute opportunity to go to court or a closing where business attire will be required. Similarly, even if it’s 100 degrees outside, it’s frequently a meat locker inside, so you may want to leave a sweater or jacket at the office.

If you are on an assignment that will have you meeting with the client, going to depositions, spending time at the printers, or otherwise not holed up in your office or the library all day, check whether you should wear “business” or “business casual” attire to be dressed like the rest of the team.

Finally, ask yourself, when you are ready to go out the door in the morning, if you would be comfortable encountering the head of the law firm in what you’re wearing. If you think the answer is yes, you’re either (i) fine or (ii) clueless about law firm life and dressing incorrectly will not be your biggest career-limiting move.

Staying Within Your Budget. Since every firm’s interpretation of “business casual” varies, before you invest heavily in a summer wardrobe, try to ascertain the basic parameters in place at your firm from the recruiting director, associates or other law students who summered there. If you already own dress slacks, a blazer, or light-weight sweater sets, you are probably equipped with the basics of a summer uniform at most firms. While you will also need more formal suits and business attire, you may well be sufficiently equipped in this category from the fall interview process.

In filling out the business casual side of your closet, recognize that basics blend and are always in fashion — solid blue blazers, sweater-sets, button-downs, and dress slacks are classics for a reason. Before you show up for work, you need only enough outfits to get you through the first week without a dry-cleaning panic, and then you can shop as your paychecks come in and you see what lawyers around

the office are really wearing. In the past, a number of stores have catered to the summer business casual market by offering special discounts to law firms and summer associates; it can’t hurt to check with the recruiting department at your firm to see if coupons are available.

What to Wear to Social Events. One of the most vexing issues for many summer associates is how to dress for the varied social functions hosted by law firms. While the invitations usually give some clue (“dressy casual,” “casual chic,” “beachwear,” “bowling attire”), these descriptions are frequently as unhelpful as they are short. If in doubt, check with the recruiting coordinator or your associate buddy/mentor.

Regardless of the dress code for a social event, keep in mind that even though you are out of the office, you are still a professional at a law firm and should be dressed to socialize with colleagues. While it belongs in a different article, drinking alcohol to the point that you think a lampshade is a proper accessory is also unacceptable.

Beating the Heat in Business Attire. For those summering where business attire is expected year-round, as well as the unlucky few who find themselves dressing for court on days when the elderly and infants are advised to stay indoors, you can stay cool by thinking light. Suits in summer-weight fabrics are essential to your business wardrobe. Avoid black and dark colors, which absorb heat, and stick with lighter business tones. Plan to remove a layer outdoors by wearing a shirt or sleeveless dress under your suit jacket. At the same time, remember the cardinal rule is to follow the lead of the most successful lawyers in the firm, whatever the fashion category.

Bottom Line. As with most things in life, common sense goes a long way in navigating the business casual minefields without imperiling your legal career. As long as you keep the “business” in “business casual” and let good taste be your guide, you should be able to dress in comfort and enjoy your summer. •

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