

Facet: Appearance

Six Strategies for Building a Professional Image that Drives Business Results

By Mary Lou Andre

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Professional image is an expression of who you are as a leader. Mary Lou Andre, one of the top image consultants in the country, is now bringing decades of executive image expertise to the Bates leadership community as a new Affiliate. Mary Lou advises men and women in the art of professional image, coaching them to convey an authentic, professional brand through wardrobe and style. Here, she offers six tips on building a wardrobe that reflects your substance as a leader.

1. Dress above industry standards.



Doing so sends the signal that you are at the top of your game. Dressing above industry standards means a better fit, fabric, cut and style to your wardrobe. **When you're top drawer,** people notice. This approach speaks volumes about your brand. People assume **that you're** more capable, professional and confident. Non-verbal cues are powerful.

2. Know the rules about business casual versus business professional

Overly casual dress codes are for amateurs. **The term "business casual" has a very specific meaning in the C-Suite.** Industry to industry, standards may vary slightly, however, a jacket without a tie for men is a **C-Suite business casual look.** **Women, don't underestimate the**

power of jackets in your business casual wardrobe either. While not the only choice, jackets that fit and coordinate well with other components of your outfit tend to be an easy way to command a higher level of respect for yourself and others. For both men and women, maintaining a standard of high quality and being appropriate to every situation is essential. Think *business first, casual second— or never if it does not serve you well*.

3. *Appear effortlessly pulled together at all times.*

Don't look like you're trying too hard – you want to be authentic, natural and yet pulled together. What you do behind the scenes is critical to making sure you can show up every day appearing confident and pulled together when you arrive at work. Seasonal shopping outings (including having things properly tailored), standing appointments with skilled wardrobe, hair, make-up, skincare, dental and eyewear specialists as well as regularly using a reputable drycleaner are not indulgences – they are necessities to busy executives and professionals who must create a professional presence that sends a consistent message and makes a positive impact.

4. *Fit in while standing out.*



A well-chosen watch, a designer tote, and a fashion-forward coat in a cut that sets a business tone are three examples of how to add signature style to a professional wardrobe. Leaders consistently tell us wearing a few higher-end, stylish accent pieces with standard base pieces in their wardrobes subtly yet significantly enhances their personal brand and makes them more memorable and distinctive.

5. *Come across at ease and as approachable.*

When clothing fits you well, is appropriate for business, and sets good business boundaries, you feel more comfortable in your own skin. When you are more comfortable with yourself, others are more comfortable in **your company. It's that simple.**

6. Set the tone for what is expected from others.

Finally, if you are struggling with a workforce that is overly causal and lax in their appearance, a good way to start to reverse this trend is to enhance your own style of dress. For instance, if you hardly ever wear a jacket, start wearing one. Blazers and sports coats tend to instantly communicate a higher level of expectation from others you interact with both on and off the job. Jean days can be another trap for professionals. Jeans are generally perceived as the lowest level pant choice on the professional food chain, so incorporate them into your dress code with thought.

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