

The power of first impressions

Polish your professional image before the job interview

By: Linda Hersey, eon.com, September 06, 2006

Do you remember what you wore to the office yesterday? Last week?

Patti Tessendorf, a management coach from Atlanta, Ga., recalls in detail how she dressed for a job interview in September 2005.



Tessendorf even remembers her shade of lipstick.

"I wanted to dress like I would present myself in a corporate classroom," Tessendorf said of her preparations. "The look I went for was professional and stylish, not too stuffy."

Tessendorf is not obsessed with fashion. At 51, she placed a new focus on image as a career move, updating her wardrobe and coloring her gray hair. Today, she is convinced that how she dressed for the job interview helped land her position as principal at InfoMentis Inc., based in the Atlanta area.

"I used to dress a bit dowdy," said Tessendorf, who previously worked in software sales. "I knew I needed to change the way I looked to be competitive and feel confident."

Her winning outfit was a charcoal-gray pantsuit with a faint pinstripe, paired with a crisp white blouse. Shoes were black leather flats, with pointed toes. Deep red lipstick, she said, drew attention to her face.

Tessendorf's makeover is hardly unusual. Americans in their 50s and 60s are the first generation to reinvent themselves at mid-life and beyond. They are switching jobs, trying new careers, refusing to retire. Face-to-face job interviews are the crucial step to employment, with hiring managers making swift judgments on candidates based on one meeting or two. Top image consultants say older job seekers need to focus less on looking young than on dressing in a contemporary, professional manner.

Investing in your image

"Whether we like it or not, people are always making judgments based on appearance," said image consultant Peggy M. Parks, who assisted Tessendorf with her makeover. "But job candidates often don't match in appearance the professionalism they show in their resumes."

Perhaps it is because many job seekers spend much more time polishing their portfolios than their nails. After all, companies hire people based on their merits. But Parks, a former human resources manager, advises job candidates not to underestimate the power of first impressions.

"Many clients who come to me are mid-career or older," said Parks, who owns The Parks Image Group Inc. "They are moving on to the next job, or they get promoted. They suddenly realize they need to look more up to date."

Tessendorf's experience reflects that. She was in the midst of a career transition. She hired Parks to improve her image the same way she might seek professional help to update a resume.

"I saw this as an investment in myself, in my marketability," Tessendorf said. Parks helped Tessendorf revise her wardrobe, highlight her best features, and present herself well for that critical job interview.

"In my type of position, working as a management coach in sales, you don't want someone who looks too young," Tessendorf said. "But you also need someone to be youthful and dynamic."

Tips on updating your appearance

In addition to the makeover, Parks provided Tessendorf with a customized portfolio of fashion styles to meet her needs and body type. But not everyone can afford an image consultant, whose fees may range from \$125 to \$250 an hour, depending on the city.

Parks has advice for older job candidates on improving appearances without spending a lot of money.

1. **Update your image.** Don't wear a 20-year-old suit to an interview, or an outdated hairdo. Employers may worry you are stuck in the past, and cannot keep up with a changing workplace. "It's not wrong to look older," Parks said. "But you need to look up to date."
2. **Let your appearance reflect your work values.** Show you are organized by carrying your portfolio in a contemporary briefcase. Look professional by wearing a stylish but conservative suit.
3. **Draw the interviewer's attention to your face, not your wardrobe.** Women should not wear short skirts or jewelry that jangles. Men should leave the cufflinks at home, unless they are interviewing for the CEO's job.
4. **An affordable way to get help with makeup** is to visit a cosmetics counter at a department store. An associate can direct women to foundation that will not emphasize wrinkles, or lipstick that works well with their skin tone.
5. **Men and women should pay a professional stylist** to color gray or dull hair. They should not try to do it on their own. The results can look fake.

Making snap judgements

A professional image should not be limited to special occasions, like important board meetings or job interviews. Marge Roberts realized that.

Roberts was planning to retire from nursing, when she was recruited to lead a national manufacturer of homeopathic products.

"I was asked by an associate whom I had served with on a nonprofit to take over as

president of his company," said Roberts, who joined Newton Laboratories in 2004 as president. "He probably did not care that I did not dress like an executive. But I noticed. I had been wearing a nurse's uniform every day for 30 years."

Roberts described her hairstyle at the time, as the "Dorothy Hammill look," based on the Olympic skater's appearance in the late 1970s. She hired a personal shopper and created an executive image.

"I'm out a lot representing the company," said Roberts, 54. "I need to look the part and not just buy clothes for comfort. At home, I'm used to wearing baggy shirts and jeans."

Roberts' company is small, employing a dozen workers. Her job also involves meeting prospective employees as well as sales people offering product lines.

"I know right off the bat if I have concerns," Roberts said. "I remember a young man who walked into our office selling a product. It looked like he had not ironed his shirt in a week. If he doesn't care what he looks like, how can he care about what he sells?"

Parks understands her view. "People pass judgment in the first seven to 10 seconds of meeting," said Parks. "The key is to be groomed, polished and courteous. Your goal is to establish instant credibility."

You Can Do It!

Here are some more tips for looking your best at job interviews.

- Men and women: Wear jackets to office interviews.
- When in doubt about company attire, call the Human Resources department prior to an interview and ask what is appropriate to wear.
- If the office dress code is business casual, do not dress down for your interview. Suit and tie for men, or pantsuit for women may work best.
- Wear classic jewelry, such as clip earrings for women or dress watches for men.
- Carry your portfolio in a leather briefcase. Women, consider adding your wallet and lipstick to the briefcase and leaving your handbag at home. You can look overwhelmed or disorganized if you have too many items to carry.
- While waiting in the reception area, turn off the cell phone and keep it off.
- Choose a chair that is not too soft and is easy to rise from without assistance.