Dress to Network — Every Encounter Counts

No matter what the situation, don't get caught in your laundry-day look.

By Joyann King

GOT A LUNCH DATE with a friend who knows a friend who has a friend who is hiring? Did the boss invite you to join him at the Yankees game? Schmoozing at a gallery opening? If your calendar is chock-full of potential networking opportunities, it’s time to make an appointment with your closet as well.

Networking outside the office is your best chance to meet new people beyond your corporate circle who can help promote your career. It’s also a no-man’s land when it comes to the dress code.

Networking is not an interview, and once outside the office, the strict rules of the dress code no longer apply. You’re left on your own to overdress and look like you don’t belong or underdress and look like you’ll never belong.

If you’re not sure what everyone will be wearing, ask around to ensure you won’t be the only one sans suit. When in doubt, business casual is your best bet. But the clothes call could run the gamut from a tuxedo to jeans. Networking outside the office, with more focus on culture and entertainment, is also the perfect opportunity to be more fashion forward and express yourself. This is not a free pass to don your sequined ‘80s jumpsuit, but wear your favorite colors; accessorize; and, most of all, smile.

My One Fashion Secret

By Matthew Rothenberg, Editor-in-Chief, TheLadders.com

I’M GOING TO LET YOU IN ON A SECRET you might not know about the fashion industry: It’s full of really nice, sensible folks.

When I moved from tech journalism to running an assortment of consumer Web sites that included ELLE and ELLEGirl, I didn’t know what to expect. (My household watches all the design shows on Bravo, after all.) Divas? Tantrums and tiaras?

In fact, I met some wonderful people with a great deal of common sense about how real people on real budgets can make it work, fashion-wise.

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What did you think of this package?
Got a story of your own to tell? Have ideas for future coverage? Please write Editor-in-Chief Matthew Rothenberg at matthewr@theladders.com.
Dress Code Timeline: The Demise of Your Professional Style

Most of us begin every new job with the best intentions to dress sharp five days a week, 50 weeks a year. But alarm clocks and laundry days eventually win out, and our wardrobe weakens.

0-3 months
You lay out your outfit the night before, planning ahead depending on what the day entails. Even your most uncomfortable shoes and binding (yet sharp!) pencil skirt get worn. You never loosen your tie after lunch, and your jacket is always on. Casual Fridays mean nothing to you.

3-6 months
Still concerned with looking sharp, your look is still planned out and professional. But after lunch, your look tends to get a little sloppy: tie loose, jacket on the back of the chair, heels under the desk.

3-12 months
Mornings are harder, and alarms more annoying. Since you have quit laying out your outfit the night before, you stand in your closet sleepy and usually end up wearing something quite similar to the day before. You can’t bear those tight shoes anymore, so your favorite, slightly worn, pair is the staple. You officially wear jeans for the first time on Friday, with a sport coat of course!

1-3 years
You are on style autopilot. You wear a suit when you have to, but overall your dry-cleaning bill has been cut in half since you don a polo whenever possible. You would much rather spend money on your golf or weekend wardrobe than your professional look. Even if it means looking a little dated and frumpy at the office — who cares! You fully embrace casual Friday, sometimes even starting on Thursday.

3+ years
You haven’t bought new work clothes in three years, and your assistant secretly tracks your mood based on your shirt (‘cause yes, she has them all memorized). You forgot how to tie a tie, so your wife has to buy you clip-on ties for days you are required to wear one. You wear one black sock and one blue sock on a daily basis and are campaigning for casual Monday through Fridays.

NETWORK

To help you dress properly for the occasions you might encounter on the job search, here are some common networking scenarios as well as some stylish solutions for men and women facing each event.

Reminder: Dress for success every day, no matter what’s on the agenda — you never know who you will run into on your lunch break!

NETWORKING SCENARIOS

A job fair
Attending a job fair is basically like speed interviewing. You should be dressed for the possibility of in-the-moment interview. In other words, wear a suit.

Women: A dress is appropriate as well, when paired with a tailored jacket. Choose shapes that work for your body. Stick to a flattering palette of black, navy, gray or cream. Keep jewelry delicate, but carry a chic tote. (It’s not fashionable to schlepp a canvas bag full of resumes!)

Men: You know the rules: nice fit suit, power tie and polished shoes.

For more formal interview style tips check out my article “Lose the ‘Frump Factor,’ Win the Job.”
Lunch with a connected friend

Your old college buddy wants to do lunch and might be bringing a big-time player in your industry along. A business associate wants to get your thoughts over lunch on a new venture he’s considering. Whatever the circumstance, lunch can be a tricky style situation. You want to be dressed to impress, but too formal sends the impression that you are too eager and don’t respect the social aspect of the meeting. In other words, the goal is to play it cool while looking casually sharp. My rule is wear business casual with an emphasis on the casual.

**Women:** Wear your favorite separates, like a slim pencil skirt and printed blouse. Avoid looking staunch by ditching your jacket, close-toed shoes, and oversized work tote. Opt for pretty heels and a smaller handbag — no resume required!

**Men:** Keep your look casual in dark jeans or crisp khakis and a button-down in classic color. Wear your suit jacket on top to add the right element of professionalism. No tie required, but a leather belt with a square metal buckle and sleek oxfords will complete your casual business attire.

A cocktail party

Whether you are celebrating with a group of friends or a colleague invites you to a benefit, cocktail parties are the perfect excuse for schmoozing. The great debate in the fashion arena is what defines “cocktail attire.” Short dress? Suit and tie required? While these are all up for discussion, it is best to avoid the risk of looking inappropriate by wearing what has always classically defined cocktail attire: a short, formal dress or a suit and tie. When it comes to your professional image, it is always better to be overdressed than underdressed.

**Women:** Choose a cocktail dress that is flattering and exposes a tasteful amount of skin. No plunging necklines or bandage dresses, please. Look for a hem that grazes the knee — any longer, and you will look dated; any shorter, and you will look like you belong in a club. Dresses made in chiffon or silk lay nicer than satin, which tends to rumple in all the wrong places. A silhouette that flatters almost any women’s body is sleeveless, with a scoop neck, fitted waist and slightly fuller skirt. Avoid fussy prints and stick to colors that translate well at night: black, gray, shades of red and navy. Wear open-toed heels and your favorite ear or neck sparklers for a finishing touch.

**Men:** I am not trying to torture you, but you need to wear a suit. Your best suit. Use this opportunity to experiment with colors. In other words, save your black suit for the office. Try suits in shades of gray or tan. Tiny-printed or solid-color ties give a dressier appearance appropriate for a cocktail party. Add a tiny pocket square for a finishing touch.
**Drinks with a colleague**

Whether grabbing a cocktail with a co-worker or meeting a potential employer for a scotch, your daytime look will require some minor adjustments for the bar. Most people don’t have time to run home and change after work, but a few additional items and tricks will keep your look professional but night-worthy.

**Women:** Wear a blouse or dress with tasteful embellishments, whether it has a sheen, a beaded design or simply a row of ruffles. This will allow your look to translate easily from the office to the bar. Ditch unwanted layers such as tights, jackets or cardigans. Last, add a fashionable necklace in colorful jewels, and don’t forget to switch your day tote for a sleek clutch. Transformation complete!

**Men:** Lose your jacket, roll up your sleeves and slightly loosen your tie for a relaxed look. Add a fashionable vest or casual sport coat for a style statement.

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**A conference or seminar**

A gathering of top industry professionals or a business seminar is a great way to network with names with whom you are probably familiar but have yet to meet face-to-face. With an opportunity to zero in on specific industry influencers, it is key you make a good first impression. While formal attire is not required, you don’t want to be caught shaking hands without a jacket on your arm. Your look for these opportunities should be business casual, with an emphasis on business.

**Women:** Sick of your skirt-and-blouse office routine? Use this opportunity to wear a flattering shift dress in a rich color. With a hem right around the knee and a minimal neckline, this is the perfect notice-me look. Closed-toed heels and a sleek tote will ensure you look professional. Bring a tailored jacket or cardigan with you in case you get cold, but wearing it is not a must.

**Men:** See “A job fair.” (Only you don’t need to be wearing your jacket; it’s there just in case.)
Tickets to the big game

What to wear when drinking beer and eating nachos with the boss while watching his favorite sports team? In such a casual environment as a sporting arena, dressing with a business purpose in mind is tricky. The key to looking relaxed yet professional is choosing the right fabrics and showing the appropriate amount of skin. As a rule, the attire should be weekend casual.

Women: Although you might usually grab a tank and shorts for game day, when networking is on the agenda, opt for a little less skin. Try cotton shorts with at least a 5-inch inseam, and tuck in an airy button down in linen or chambray. Wear flat sandals, no flip-flops. Classic aviators and a sporty watch complete your look.

Men: Reach for your weekend pants, like a lightweight chino or classic jeans, but avoid sporting shorts in front of the boss. A cotton polo will keep you cool, but the collar will keep you looking cleaned up. Wear sandals or sleek sneakers, no flip-flops. But feel free to wear your favorite baseball hat!

Weekend barbeque

Whether headed to a Fourth of July blowout or a more intimate birthday celebration for a colleague, barbeques are a great chance to meet friends of friends and expand your professional network. But unless you are manning the grill, your look needs to send the right message. The attire for a barbeque is weekend casual, with an Americana influence. (No crop tops or wife beaters allowed.)

Women: Try a breezy denim skirt (stay away from minis) and striped knit tank. Make sure the straps are thick enough that you won’t have any bra-strap mishaps. Metallic sandals and a chunky bracelet add just the right amount of polish. A knee-length sundress (avoid halters) is also a stylish but appropriate option.

Men: Khaki or navy shorts (no jean shorts, ever!) are a temperature-friendly option for barbeques. Try a polo shirt in classic color, as T-shirts tend to look sloppy. Avoid wearing a hat so you can make good eye contact. Lastly, brown leather sandals are a more-polished option than flip-flops.
Style Day to Night — No Wardrobe Switch Required

YOU DON'T HAVE TIME TO RUN HOME TO CHANGE after work, but you don't want to show up to dinner or drinks looking like you are about to deliver a PowerPoint presentation. Not to worry! Your most basic office look is easily transformed into an appropriate outfit for an evening of networking with just a few simple tricks:

1. Add some flair.
   Take your basic white blouse from boring to glamorous with a jeweled necklace or sparkly chandelier earrings. Remember to loosen the collar and roll up the sleeves for a devil-may-care attitude. Trade your practical pumps and flats for sexy stilettos or knee-high boots.

2) Amp up your makeup.
   A red lip or thick black eyeliner goes a long way in transforming your look from day to night. These classic nighttime makeup staples are not usually appropriate for the office but look great over cocktails. Keep you hair up during the workday? Take it down and shake it out for a tousled going-out look.

3) Relax your look.
   Your suit jacket and tie are just a pair of dark denim jeans away from a stylish look for cocktails. Be sure to switch out your wingtips for a more casual shoe, like suede oxfords. Ladies, if hose or tights are an office requirement, take this opportunity to lose them.

4) Shed some layers.
   It’s no secret that nighttime dressing is more skin-friendly than your office would appreciate. When headed to after-work cocktails, leave your cardigan, jacket, tie, blazer or sweater at your desk. Ladies, ditch your awkward day-bag that weighs 100 pounds for a sleek, metallic clutch that easily stores in your desk drawer.

Photos: Courtesy of J Crew

Joyann King is a New York fashion editor and stylist. She has worked in the fashion departments of glossy magazines like Glamour and Self and contributes frequently to Elle.com and Instyle.com. Formerly the fashion editor at ELLEgirl.com and a stylist for Macy’s, and JCPenney, Joyann loves helping real people find their own personal style. She can be seen in fashion videos on ELLE.com and CBSnews.com offering her unique perspective on current trends. Check out her daily style blog, Style Secrets, on SELF.com.