Dress code in business: a no-wear zone for Mickey Mouse and the New York skyline

You never get a second chance to make a first impression!

Barkawi Management Consultants
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Looking the part is an important element of professionalism. The clothes do indeed often make the man. One-time Green party activist Joschka Fischer traded in his jeans and sneakers after many years on the political stage and became Germany’s Foreign Minister and Vice Chancellor. By wearing the same ‘uniform’, Angela Merkel avoids distracting attention from what really matters in her government’s policy. The discussions about the Merkel Neckline at the opening of the Oslo opera house in 2008 show how quickly the press and others can be sidetracked from the essentials. The Chancellor’s cleavage suddenly swallowed up the political agenda.

Not only for women, for men too, the outfit shouldn’t overshadow the essence, and it can do so in both directions: too much and too little! Many a promotion to a higher management position has been lost due to an inadequate appearance.

There are rules when it comes to business attire, and while they do vary from sector to sector, the basics remain consistent. We management consultants work in another environment than creative advertising professionals, trendy fashion editors, intellectual journalists, etc., and so our dress code is also different.

The following fashion tips and recommendations, however, can be applied to other professions, and are just as valid for legal practitioners, accountants and HR executives as they are for IT and sales managers who quite simply want to be well dressed. And the emphasis here lies on all three words: ‘simply well dressed’. They also mean that the dress code makes life easier; because by taking a few rules to heart and acquiring a small number of well-chosen items, you can always be assured of making the right impression!

Simply well dressed with just a few rules in mind!

Not too long ago, being well dressed was a question of money. Today there is an endless variety of fine, elegant attire that is entirely affordable. So we are not talking about prohibitively priced tailored shirts with monogram, 800-euro welted Shell Cordovan shoes or Brioni made-to-measure suits for 5,000 euros. German Minister of Justice, Heiko Maas, was elected ‘Best Dressed Politician’ in early 2016, and responded by saying that the only thing special about his clothing style was how little he spent on it. So stylish and elegant doesn’t have to also mean costly!

As a basic fundamental, let us say this: you can flex your fashion muscles in your own free time. The typical working clothes of a consultant are unpretentious, elegant and extremely simple.

Your suit can be any color, as long as it is dark grey! That may be a running gag among consultants, but it is true nonetheless. Dark blue and black can be great in the boardroom, but they can also make you look
like you are going to a wedding or funeral, so dark grey keeps you on the safe side when it comes to business.

For shoes and the matching belt, simple and elegant are again the catchwords. Ties should also be refined and understated, with discreet patterns only – no hippie florals or fun Mickey Mouse motifs or what-have-you, even if they happen to be ‘all the rage’ at the time. The New York skyline is also something you should definitely see, but not on your tiepin! Because tiepins are a no-go in business life – any kind of tiepin!

**Elegance needn’t be costly:**

**Chic shoes**

Light-colored shoes, beige, Bordeaux, linen shoes, sneakers, sandals, etc. are recreational footwear! Dress shoes are always dark (black or dark brown), and ideally either Oxfords (smooth surface) or Brogues (with perforations). The plainness or intensity of the perforation designs on the shoe varies with the weight of the suit material. An Oxford shoe tends to be worn with lighter, finer suit fabrics, while a Brogue can be worn with heavier, more wintery suits. Both styles look very elegant with a grey suit!

We advise against shoes with a rubber sole (business shoes have a leather sole, end of discussion), toe caps, decorative stitching and anything that turns a shoe, even a black one, into a piece of leisure-time footwear.

**Suits:**

**50 shades of grey?**

Consultants’ suits are dark grey! Not light grey, not khaki – not even in summer – and least of all do they have patterns. Grey is, you might say, something of an ‘occupational sickness’ for consultants, though a very elegant one!

While they can be just right for certain occasions, combinations, sports jackets, patterned jackets with different-colored pants, and corduroy jackets are taboo in the formal working environment, and even more so in interactions with clients.

Companies with a Casual Friday loosen up the restrictions for the last day of the working week, but even here, a sports jacket or combination should be classical, and not simply the jacket from a different suit.
Ties: no-wear zone for Mickey Mouse and the New York skyline

Ties with loud motifs (e.g. cartoon figures, big floral patterns, wild Pop Art designs, etc.) may have their place, but that place is not around the neck of a consultant at work. Grandma’s hand-made silk tie is not compatible either, nor is the ‘frugal’-looking synthetic fabric tie that runs the risk of melting if the discussion becomes heated.

When in doubt, any discreetly patterned silk(!) tie will serve you well. Diagonal club-patterns are elegant and stylish, too. You can find these in an almost endless variety of versions at most menswear stores for well below 50 euros a piece. It is a good idea, however, to toss a good tie over your shoulder when eating, because after being washed and ironed, a tie takes on the visual charm of a dead fish.

Belts: match the shoes

Belts are made of leather, have the look of subdued quality and match the shoes (and for the particularly pedantic, the chrome buckle goes with the chrome wristwatch). Dark brown shoes with a dark-grey suit require a dark brown belt, which is never ever, ever to be combined with suspenders, even if you are the kind of person who likes to be doubly insured for every eventuality. This is an ‘either or’ situation! Avoid fabric belts and/or belts that don’t fit into a work surrounding in some other way, for example ones with oversized or superhero buckles.

Socks and knee-length socks: understated and the same color as the shoes

The shoes and belt indicate what dimensions your socks – preferably knee-length – should have! A strip of hairy leg peeking out between a too-short sock and a trouser hem is generally not all that attractive, so knee-length socks made of a fine wool-knit are the more elegant option.

Light colored, white or patterned socks or socks with a motif are an absolute no-go in business. Plain knee-lengths in the color of your shoes – i.e. black – or the same dark grey as your suit are a must without exception!

That is unless you are a London banker, because there, tomato-red knee-lengths are a real fashion statement. And since so many are following the colored-sock trend right now, single-colored socks in exactly the same hue as the tie are a rare exception.

But if that’s too foppish or risky for you – and fair enough if it is, because it can very easily go horribly wrong – stick to simple but elegant knee-length socks in the same color as your shoes and everything will be just fine.
Shirts: cutaways, short sleeves & Co.

Shirts are a very easy topic for consultants too: white, light blue, rosé and with subdued checks or stripes. In your free time you can knock yourself out with Hawaii shirts, black or dark shirts as are popular in the advertising industry, and rainbow-spectrum stripes can be fun, but they are just as unsuitable for work as short sleeves. Please never wear the latter with a suit. Short-sleeved suits have no place in the business world.

The collar type is up to you. Whether you are a Windsor, Kent or cutaway fan, all versions are good for business. What you should know is that a button-down collar is to be worn open and without a tie! Stand-up collars and other types of high-fashion shirts are reserved for your free time outside the office. And it goes without saying that a shirt has to be well ironed.

Various shirt-makers offer wash-and-wear shirts with excellent characteristics. The bad news is that none of those characteristics is actually that they don’t need ironing. The good news is that a non-iron shirt takes only a fraction of the time to iron as a normal one. Because the fibers are structured differently, they flatten out wonderfully at the mere touch of a hot iron, but that touch remains necessary!

Shirt sleeves also come with double cuffs, which can look very elegant with cufflinks. But here too the list of atrocities seems to know no bounds. In a nutshell, the basic tenet of ‘less is more’ applies to cufflinks too. No colors of your favorite football team, flashy signets from fake universities or Darth Vader masks! Plain and elegant is also the guideline for watches, rings and jewelry for men in a business setting. What is good for your wrist while cruising the beach in Ibiza may well be way off base at work.

Pocket squares:
hands off matching sets

Pocket squares give the male fashion imagination yet another mode of expression. Whether it should be a handkerchief or not, folded how? Ruffled, frilly or with a flat straight edge? It’s all up to the wearer. There is only one thing that has to be
observed here, and that is that the pocket kerchief should never match the tie! Some menswear stores will offer matching sets: it is an offer you should refuse. If you are going to be creative with this accessory, then be really creative and show your taste by combining dissimilar colors and patterns so they work well together. If you are unsure, try a good-quality white kerchief, or just forget about them altogether.

Shopping list: shopping made easy

Ok, so that makes sense, but it is easier said than done. So here are two recommendations to reduce the complexity and help you approach the business attire topic pragmatically:

1. There are excellent men’s outfitters, both online and off. The British online shop Charles Tyrwhitt, for example, offers high quality, good looks and inexpensive prices. Thanks to the clearly structured product range, you can’t really lose your way here, and you don’t have to fear any doubts about whether a given article is good for business or not, because they only have business clothing.

2. A shopping list

The following items represent a good minimum for a man in a business environment, and can be used anywhere as an all-purpose wardrobe:

There’s no accounting for taste, but if you take these few recommendations to heart, you will be safe from fashion blunders, and if your rise in the business world falters, it won’t be because of the dress code. That’s a promise!
SHOPPING-LIST

2 suits in business grey
5 business shirts in the colors white, light blue, modestly striped or checked, and for those so inclined, in rosé – non-iron is best
1 belt in black
1-2 pairs of black business shoes
1 belt in elegant chocolate brown
1 pair of business shoes in elegant chocolate brown, Knee-length socks in black, dark grey/anthracite
5 silk ties with a reserved pattern or diagonal club stripes.

Barkawi Management Consultants

Barkawi Management Consultants was founded in 1994, today employs more than 100 staff and has offices in Munich (head office), Shanghai, Moscow, Atlanta and Vienna. The clients of Barkawi Management Consultants are global enterprises with capital-intensive and logistically complex business models, such as 3M, BMW, Daimler, Fresenius, Nokia, Vodafone and many more.

Barkawi Management Consultants GmbH & Co. KG
Baierbrunner Str. 35
81379 Munich

Phone: +49 89 749826-0
Fax: +49 89 749826-739
info@barkawi.com
www.barkawi.com

Barkawi Management Consultants is part of Barkawi Group. Carena and Karim Barkawi are the managing directors of the Holding and parent company.

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What should a businessman wear? Are socks in sandals good for the office, or are they merely a sure sign of a German on holiday? Do short-sleeved shorts help against the heat in summer, or are they merely an effective vaccination against career, promotion and salary increases?

Read what’s on the list of atrocities, and why you can’t buy class. Entertaining, enlightening and with helpful hints and recommendations.