

## Want to Be CEO? You Have to Dress the Part

Even High-Level Job Recruits Commit Wardrobe Gaffes; 'You Need Some Better Socks'

By Todd R. Weiss



**Dorothy Waldt**  
Partner, CTPartners

Smart dressing involves sending subliminal messages, particularly when a serious job is at stake. This is something that even high-ranking business leaders can underestimate.

In commerce, unlike in Hollywood, fashion plays a largely uncredited role. Business schools train graduates to shine their shoes for an interview. But once established, apart from avoiding the obvious gaffe -- a coffee-stained shirt or a visible rhinestone bra strap -- many

executives spend little time contemplating what to wear to a job interview. At their peril.

*I recently suggested to Dorothy Waldt, a New York executive recruiter, that CEOs and other high-level job candidates must know what to wear by that stage in their careers. "You'd think!" she said when she had stopped laughing.*

*"People don't understand the messages that their clothes send," says Ms. Waldt, a recruiter with CTPartners. Women sometimes don't realize how often a tight shirt or a low neckline comes across as seductive. People who meet them are likely to assume the sexual innuendo is intentional. It's harder for men to goof, but they do -- for instance, by being sloppy with untucked or wrinkled shirts or wearing beeping sports watches to staid business events. Sagging socks, dangling earrings and obvious designer logos all send messages that register with the people on the other side of the table.*

To complicate matters, things aren't as cut-and-dried as they were in the days of strict blue-collar and white-collar work uniforms. Following the old dress-for-success rules, with ties and starched white shirts, would create suspicion and awkwardness at Google's dressed-down headquarters today. Executive job seekers have to study more than the balance sheet these days -- they have to suss out a company's fashion ethos. Candidates may want to call the

hiring manager's assistant or ask a recruiter about the appropriate look before they show up for the interview.

*Ms. Waldt recalls a candidate sent to interview with a retailer that had a casual culture. Unfortunately for him, he dressed up. "The clothes that he was wearing were so polar-opposite of what the company did that they thought he just didn't get them at all," says Ms. Waldt. They never bothered to interview him. "He sat in a holding pen all day and flew home."*

Possibly, that job candidate wouldn't have wanted to work at a company that dismissed him so summarily. Yet boards of directors routinely size up executive-level candidates by inspecting the clues in their clothes. Hal Reiter, an executive recruiter and chairman and chief executive of Herbert Mines Associates, recalls meeting with a CEO candidate for a mainstream retailer.

The man, chief financial officer of a major big-box retailer, showed up in a navy-blue necktie with a gold circular symbol surrounded by what looked like leaves and red blotches. Upon closer inspection, Mr. Reiter discovered that the red was blood dripping from a crown of thorns. The tie isn't the main reason he didn't get the job, but the distractingly graphic religious imagery didn't help.

Mr. Reiter, who leans toward Brioni suits himself, rails about "horrible footwear -- unshined, rubber soles, acrylic socks" that he sees frequently. He isn't shy about dressing people down, according to Larry McClure, senior vice president of human resources for Liz Claiborne Inc., who once hired Mr. Reiter to locate a senior-level recruit. In the car on their way to the interview in Newark, N.J., the executive recruiter glanced at Mr. McClure's feet, which were ensconced in worn, pilled socks. "I gotta help you out here," Mr. Reiter announced, according to both men. "You need some better socks. They're horrible."

I guess I never figured that people would look at my socks," says Mr. McClure, who has since invested in new ones, as well as Donald Pliner shoes.

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Mr. Reiter's parting shot for aspiring executives at businesses with a formal ethos: "It takes \$1,000 to buy a suit that looks good." And when you wear it, "you can't look like it's the first time, either."

For ideas on looking authoritative but approachable, look at politicians -- the most practiced job candidates of all -- who are savvy at flashing messages with their clothing. In the ultimate employment interview, for U.S. President, Hillary Clinton wore a looped red scarf in New Hampshire earlier this week that looked decisive and framed her face, while her dark suit hit that nice-not-loud note that signals that we're supposed to be paying attention to her brain, not her designer.

While sweaters aren't a go-to look for most job interviews, Joe Lieberman last month wore a warm crimson sweater under his blazer to endorse John McCain (likewise encased in a sweater and blazer). Their well-knit choice recalled the old opinion polls that found that television viewers regarded Dan Rather as more trustworthy when he read the news in a fuzzy sweater vest, than when he sported just a crisp shirt.

Female politicians know what a tightrope fashion can be: Smart clothes might not win votes, but the wrong style can lose them votes. The wardrobes of female political candidates are so closely scrutinized that the media has reported who shops for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (her husband Paul) and that former French presidential candidate Ségolène Royal buys at Zara.

We haven't yet taken fashion analysis as far with well-known business executives. But job interviewers don't miss much, says Ann Marie Sabath, a business etiquette consultant and author of *One Minute Manners*.

She is relentless about getting interview clothes right. Her advice includes ironing creases into your pants, investing in a good watch, and wearing a collar. "A collar projects authority," says Ms. Sabath, who has consulted for Citigroup, Fidelity Investments, and Procter & Gamble. Her company, At Ease Inc., operates a hotline for business-etiquette emergencies.

Ms. Sabath advises men to have their shirts professionally laundered and to button one or two jacket buttons when standing in order to look neat and well-assembled. These are details that can boost or diminish a career without leaving a trace in the memory of either party.

David Goldhill, president and chief executive of the Game Show Network, has been overhauling the television network's senior management lately. He highlighted the subliminal nature of the interviewing process when I asked if his decisions have been influenced by what a job candidate or subordinate wore, for better or for worse. "Probably," he responded, "but I'm not aware of it."

*Dorothy Waldt is a Partner with CTPartners, the premier executive search firm committed to performance, quality & results. Dorothy may be reached at 212.588.3549 or at [dwaldt@ctnet.com](mailto:dwaldt@ctnet.com). For more information about CTPartners, please visit [www.ctnet.com](http://www.ctnet.com).*