

YOUR PROFESSIONAL PRESENCE



Advice on Dress and Appearance

By Kathleen D. Pagana

Taken from *The Nurse's Etiquette Advantage*

Reprinted by permission from Sigma Theta Tau International

Do you:

- ★ Know how to look your best for a job interview?
- ★ Wonder why people question what you say?
- ★ Think you overdressed for an interview?
- ★ Think you made a bad first impression?
- ★ Want to look professional in the clinical area?



No matter what some people say, you are judged by the way you dress. Your clothes are either going to be a positive or a negative factor. *Clothes are never neutral.* If you are aware of the essentials for professional dress and body language, you can focus more on what you are saying and doing without detracting from your professional presentation.

PROFESSIONAL CLOTHING

Do clothes really make a big difference?

Yes. Suppose you received two gifts. One gift was beautifully wrapped. The other was sloppily wrapped in cheap paper. Which gift would have the greater perceived value? Whether you are interviewing for a job, giving a presentation, or asking for a promotion, the way you dress is an important part of your overall packaging. Like gift-wrapping, the more “put together” your appearance, the more positive your impression (Whitmore, 2005).

What judgments do people form about you based on your clothes?

People unconsciously judge your socioeconomic status, background, level of education, and personality (Whitmore, 2005). If you are underdressed, you can embarrass yourself and your colleagues. If you overdress, you can set the wrong tone and may intimidate others. Be aware that how you dress makes a powerful statement about yourself.

Faux pas

Elizabeth was seeking a position speaking for an international communications company. As part of her training, she conducted a seminar on presentation skills for business executives. Although her evaluations were favorable for her speaking, the company evaluators described her suit as wrinkled. She was very embarrassed and upset with the feedback. She was wearing an expensive suede suit that had just been dry-cleaned. In order to ensure her credibility, she gave away the suede suit and purchased a wool suit.

What impression are you giving if you wear sloppy or inappropriate attire?

This could imply that you do not respect yourself, that you do not place value on appearance, or that you do not care that your appearance impacts the corporate image.

How do you know the appropriate way to dress for different positions?

Look how leaders or managers dress in different positions and model your attire to match theirs. For example, an educator may have a different professional look than a corporate executive. If you are looking to advance in your career, dress like the people in the next level up.

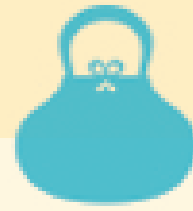
Is professional dress more of a challenge for men or for women?

It is more of a challenge for women because professional dress for men is more easily defined. Men look professional when they wear a suit and tie. The leeway in defining professional dress for women leads to the potential for inappropriate clothing. For example, common complaints about women in a professional setting include tight-fitting and short skirts, unprofessional hair, too much makeup, or clothing that is too casual (Pagana, 2005).

Do you have any tips for handbags and briefcases?

Yes, these items can detract from your overall appearance if they are shabby and worn. These articles do more than hold important papers, wallets, and cell phones. They hold clues about your professionalism, success, and personality. Think “classic” when purchasing these accessories (Whitmore, 2005).

Good Idea!



Jocelyn was delighted to hear that she was the recipient of an award for her work with teens in the Washington D.C. area. The award was to be presented at a large banquet by a United States senator. Jocelyn was planning to wear a sweater set and slacks until she spoke to her mother. When her mother offered to buy a suit, the matter was settled. On the day of the award, Jocelyn walked across the stage looking confident and stunning in a beautiful suit. Most people walk a little taller and demonstrate more confidence when they wear a suit.

It is more of a challenge for women because professional dress for men is more easily defined.

DRESSING IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

What impact does dress have in a clinical setting?

It has a bigger impact than most nurses realize. The way you dress supports or detracts from your professional image. It sends a message to others about how you see yourself and how you want to be perceived by others. It sets the stage for what others may expect from you. Most nurses would agree that they would like to be viewed as professional, intelligent, and competent. They need to ask themselves if their appearance mirrors that image.

If nurses dress too casually, patients may question their attention

to detail and their professionalism. Patients often associate appearance with trustworthiness and ability. Does a nurse dressed in bunny print scrubs establish immediate trust, authority, and credibility? Many patients complain that everyone in a clinical setting looks the same. Patients want their nurses to be clearly identifiable. This identification is also essential for having positive interactions with families, physicians, and other members of the health team.

Can scrubs be part of a professional image?

Many hospitals are re-evaluating their dress codes. The scrubs may be on their way out as the credibility and professionalism of health care personnel are under scrutiny.

According to Sandy Dumont

(2007), image consultant, uniforms are necessary for professional identification. In her opinion, nurses look most professional when wearing white. She believes that hospitals need to mandate dress codes. If they permit scrubs, she asserts that there should be uniformity. All nurses should wear the same color so it doesn't look like someone was hired off the street and doesn't have a uniform yet.

What are some general guidelines for dress in the clinical setting?

All nurses in all settings should look neat and professional. Uniforms, lab coats, scrubs, and shoes should be clean. Long hair should be pulled back and out of the face. Nametags should be visible and readable.

BODY LANGUAGE

What impact does body language have in a person's overall impression?

We communicate with each other visually, vocally, and verbally. The professional impression we provide is based on the words we use

(verbal), the way our voice sounds (vocal), and what people see (visual). The visual element has the strongest impact and consists of everything people see when they look at you. This includes your dress, grooming, and body language.

The care and time you invest in your appearance and words can be undone by body language. For example, suppose you are dressed in a professional manner, but you are slouching

(continued on page 40)

Good Idea!



Kristin was teaching a workshop on time management. The workshop was videotaped so it could be shown for evening and night shift personnel. When Kristin viewed her tape, she was disappointed. She had an unpleasant look on her face and her posture was poor. Her body language detracted from her professionalism. She used this feedback in a constructive manner and greatly improved her presentation skills. Most people would benefit by critiquing themselves on videotape.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q Are you better to be overdressed or underdressed in a new work setting?

A In general, it is better to err on the more formal side. Remember, you can always remove a jacket, but you cannot put one on if you didn't bring it with you.

Q If I am dressed inappropriately, couldn't it mean that I just did not know any better?

A Yes. But, that is not an excuse. You need to find out the appropriate dress. By your inappropriate dress, you could also be suggesting that you do not care what others think or that you are too lazy to make the effort to dress better.

Q Why are corporate casual dress codes being eliminated in many settings?

A The informality gave many people the impression that there were no guidelines or boundaries between dressing

for work or for a relaxing day at home. This had a negative impact on professional image and work ethic.

Q Is it acceptable for men to wear baseball caps inside?

A No. It is considered bad manners.

Q What about tattoos?

A Keep them hidden. Don't get them on your hand or face. The tattoo becomes part of your image and may hurt your chance of getting a job or getting promoted.

Q Is it professional for men or women to wear cologne or perfume in the work setting?

A Subtlety is the key. Remember you are not an air freshener. Moderation is best. If people comment about your cologne in the afternoon, you are using too much. If your scent lingers in a room after you've left, you are using too much. Be sensitive to the fact that many people are allergic to cologne or perfume.

and leaning back in your chair. You are probably sending a message that you are not as interested as you should be.

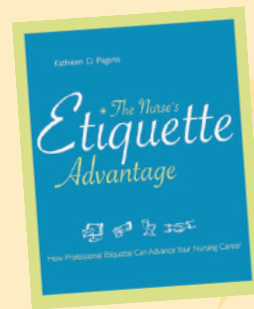
How can you tell if your body language is having a negative impact on your professional impact?

Tune in and be aware of what image your non-verbal communication is projecting. Many negative aspects of body language are bad habits that can be corrected with awareness. Get feedback from others. ☺



Kathleen D. Pagana, PhD, RN, has been a leader in healthcare for more than 30 years, with experiences including college teaching, administration, clinical practice, business management, writing, and professional speaking. Among the 18 books she has written, she is the co-author

of a number one best-selling book on health-care diagnostic and laboratory testing (*Mosby's Diagnostic & Laboratory Test Reference*). Her latest book, *The Nurse's Etiquette Advantage: How Professional Etiquette Can Advance Your Nursing Careers* published by Sigma Theta Tau International, uses the experience of others through faux pas, good ideas, FAQs, and take-away tips to illustrate how to benefit every day in clinical, business, and social settings.



Take Away Tips

- ★ You will have a better chance of feeling good on the inside if you look good on the outside.
- ★ Dress for the job you aspire to, not for the job you have.
- ★ Wear clothes that fit well. Invest in a good tailor or seamstress.
- ★ Your clothes impact your credibility.
- ★ Don't wear sunglasses inside.
- ★ Sloppy clothing may imply sloppy work.

