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WHETHER FORMAL OR CASUAL, design a dress code that reflects your firm's culture & brand

BY ERIN BRERETON

Law firms didn't have an official uniform 30 years ago, though many attorneys chose the same daily office wear - a conservative suit. This look was also lauded by John T. Molloy, the author of *Dress for Success*, a book *The New York Times* called "the 1980s bible of corporate style."

While working on a research project, Molloy discovered that the clothing teachers wore at the Connecticut prep school where he worked significantly affected their level of authority and respect. In addition to writing a book about his findings, Molloy began doing consulting work. His first clients: New York City law firms that wanted their younger attorneys to appear reputable to juries and judges.

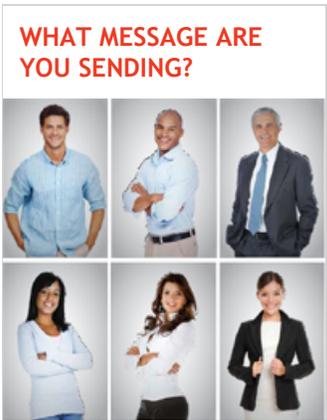
Suits, it seemed, were here to stay. However, in the 1990s, the legal industry experienced a somewhat unexpected fashion makeover. "Professional services firms had historically been pretty buttoned up," said Jonathan Fitzgarrald, Chief Marketing Officer at Greenberg Glusker Fields Claman & Machtinger LLP, a 100-attorney firm headquartered in Los Angeles. "But then the tech revolution came around and casualized everyone."

Business casual remains a popular policy choice. Only 6 percent of attorneys said attire at their firms had become more formal in the last five years, according to a recent Robert Half Legal survey. However, it seems some employees aren't finding their khakis all that comfortable. Just 43 percent said they were content with their firm's preferred attire. Why? Establishing rules that make every employee happy isn't easy.

Dress code policies aren't a one-size-fits-all proposition and each firm has different needs to consider. However, when creating a new policy – or updating a pre-existing one – striking a middle ground between maintaining a professional appearance to the business community and encouraging your firm's internal culture is important. How can you give your employees the fashion freedom and comfort they want (and often expect) without compromising your firm's image and goals? Consider the following suggestions.

DIFFERENT LOCATIONS MAY NEED DIFFERENT GUIDELINES

A dress code for a high-profile New York City law firm would likely incorporate different necessities than a policy for a small San Diego firm that rarely receives client office visits. "There are a lot of factors [to consider] – what the culture is, where the entity is located, what time of year it is," said Charles Volkert, Executive Director at legal industry staffing agency Robert Half Legal. Business litigation firm Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan, LLP, which dates back to 1986 and employs more than 600 attorneys, hasn't ever had a written dress code. Founding Partner William Urquhart – who in his younger days often wore a Hawaiian shirt to work – partially attributes the relaxed policy to the firm's Southern California beach culture roots. Being able to wear sandals and shorts isn't necessarily the norm for firms that are very involved in high stakes litigation. However, Quinn Emanuel feels its protocol encourages creativity and helps break down barriers, enabling younger attorneys to feel confident about correcting mistakes. "When you're a young person, sometimes that's a scary thing to do," Urquhart said. "If your people are all dressed the same in a relaxed way, it promotes openness."



WHAT MESSAGE ARE YOU SENDING?

Whether your firm adopts a casual, business casual or formal dress code, the decision ultimately reflects your firm's brand, culture and clientele. Formal dress policies emit the image of trust and respect, but casual codes may communicate that your firm is personable and friendly. Think about the message you want to send and what's right for your firm's future.

BEST FOOT FORWARD: QUINN EMANUEL'S BRANDED SANDALS MAKE A STATEMENT



For roughly 15 years, business litigation firm Quinn Emanuel has been giving young attorneys flip flop sandals with the firm's name printed

However, although none of Quinn Emanuel's locations have dress policies, outfits do differ based on how various cities define casual dress, Urquhart said. In the Japan and Germany offices, for example, employees may wear jeans – but would likely pair the look with a collared shirt.

CONSIDER YOUR CLIENTS

If you deal with a diverse group of clients, you may need to alter your outfits accordingly. Some companies feel a slight style upgrade conveys a sense of respect. "The rule of thumb is whatever your client's dress code is, go one step above," said Patrick Ross, a Partner at Haskell & White LLP, an accounting and business consulting firm headquartered in Irvine, California, with a business casual dress code. Other firms, such as The Law Offices of Kelly Fernandez & Karney, which has three offices in California, encourage very formal dress – whether firm members are meeting with clients or not. Men at the firm wear ties, jackets and suits. Receptionists and the office manager also dress up; there's no regularly scheduled casual Friday, and jeans aren't allowed.

Firm owner Michael Kelly feels the firm's fashion conveys competence and pride in its work. "I have a lot of motion picture clients who may dress casually, but they appreciate our professionalism," he said. When first meeting a client, particularly one from outside the United States, Quinn Emanuel attorneys typically wear business attire – although clients don't seem to mind the firm's relaxed look. "What often happens is if they come to our offices all the time, they'll eventually adopt more casual clothing," Urquhart said. "After a while, they're wearing khakis and polo shirts."

Less formal gear may also be acceptable, or even encouraged, when meeting clients outside the office who work in an extremely casual environment. "I've heard from some lawyers from Silicon Valley that if they walk into Google or [another] tech company in a three-piece suit, people are going to take notice – everyone else may be in jeans," Volkert said. And employees may not stare just because you're a sharp dresser. "If you walk into a tech company in a suit and tie, everyone wonders who's getting fired," Fitzgarrald said. "No one wants the suit."

MAKE EXCEPTIONS IF THEY WILL IMPROVE EMPLOYEES' EXPERIENCE

A 2011 study from international human capital management consultant HR Solutions found that office environment is one of the key drivers in employee satisfaction. Have a workplace where employees feel valued and they will value working there.

Some companies make temporary changes to their dress policy to allow for employee comfort. Ross' company, for example, typically relaxes its business casual requirement in the weeks leading up to the big April 15 tax deadline when employees are logging in long hours. "We let people go beyond what the normal casual dress policy is," Ross said. "If they're going to be here for 14 hours a day and want to wear sweats, that's OK."

COULD A SUIT MAKE YOU LOOK SMARTER?

Recent studies on the effect of appearances imply that formal dress may give someone an advantage during initial meetings. It takes roughly 11 seconds to form a first impression; only 7 percent of that impression is formed from what a person actually says, according to a UCLA study.

A whopping 55 percent of person-to-person communication is non-verbal, including body language, posture, gestures – and clothing. Appearance may be particularly important to younger attorneys who are trying to prove themselves in their first few years with a firm. Fitzgarrald advises new attorneys to pay attention to their outward appearance when trying to land a job or a client. "They don't have time to learn how smart you are or [view] your list of credentials," Fitzgarrald said. "They're judging you on how you look."

MAKE SURE YOUR FIRM'S LOOK CORRESPONDS WITH ITS MARKETING PLAN

If you're going after high net-worth clients, that first impression could be key. Fitzgarrald cited an L.A.-based brokerage firm that has made its sense of style its calling card. "No one is walking around in a tuxedo, but part of their culture is to look as absolutely professional as possible," Fitzgarrald said. "It's part of their brand. They want to be [the] best-dressed people in the room, and they think that reflects well on their business."

Being casually dressed won't necessarily prevent you from landing work, but looking sharp might give you a competitive edge. "People have to hustle more to get new business, and part of the pitch is someone's visual presentation," Fitzgarrald said. Client comfort can also play a part. Kelly feels formal office wear makes new clients feel confident in a firm's abilities, particularly in initial meetings. "If a client comes in and has never seen you before, and you're going to ask for a \$5,000 or \$10,000 retainer, they're not going to do it [if you don't look professional]," he said.

SOME BASICS APPLY

Casual clothing doesn't mean anything goes. Nearly two-thirds of employers have banned flip flops, 49 percent have banned miniskirts and 28 percent have banned jeans, according to a 2008 CareerBuilder.com study. Certain general standards are always a good idea to follow: Don't wear see-through clothing to work, and skip shirts with offensive language. Revealing clothing may be one of the most well-known workplace don'ts; however, companies shouldn't automatically assume women are the only ones who disobey the rules. "I've seen some guys in really ill-fitting or torn clothing that I think is really offensive," Fitzgarrald said. "Guys aren't off the hook when it comes to a dress code policy."

PROMOTE YOUR PROGRAM TO MAKE IT EFFECTIVE

Whatever policy you decide is best for your firm, the dress code needs to be clearly defined and communicated to

on the strap and carved into the bottom of the shoe. The flip-flops reflect the firm's So-Cal, surf-friendly origins, but they also serve as a symbol of its current culture. "We wanted to carve out our own identity so that we didn't just appear to be a smaller version of the large full-service law firms that most of the kids were looking at," Urquhart said. "It sends a message."

However, law students aren't the only ones clamoring for the firm's footwear. The flip-flops are occasionally distributed to other select groups, such as attendees at a seminar in China. "Everybody loves them," Urquhart said. "Clients love them. They're just fun. It's a lot better than handing out a memory stick."

PROGRAM WITH A PAYOFF:

HASKELL AND WHITE LETS EMPLOYEES BE COMFORTABLE WHILE RAISING CASH FOR CHARITY

Accounting firm Haskell & White LLP's daily dress is business casual, according to partner Patrick Ross. Employees typically wear slacks and polos or button-down shirts. Several years ago, employees, who often work long hours, asked if they could dress casually on Fridays. The firm, Ross said, thought that was a good idea and came up with another idea to make the practice beneficial. Employees plunk \$5-\$10 a week into a jar by the front door for the right to dress casually on Fridays. The money is pooled each week and given to local charities.

The receptionist oversees the program. Every Friday, she sends an email to notify employees what charity current donations are supporting and how much money was raised the week before. Haskell and White's staff has embraced the program, which Ross estimates nets roughly \$800-\$1,000 every two months. Part of the program's success, he said, is that it began with an

Whatever policy you decide is best for your firm, the dress code needs to be clearly defined and communicated to employees. "What business casual means to somebody in the tech industry may not be what business casual is to a law firm in New York City," Volkert said.

Stressing how your policy can convey a sense of professionalism to potential clients may help employees embrace the guidelines. "Bring everybody together and say, 'Listen, here's what we're trying to get to. What elements will make us successfully accomplish those goals?'" Fitzgerald suggests. "If they come up with the idea, it's less draconian of the organization. No one likes a police state." After all, the dress code you encourage employees to follow will showcase your firm's personality to clients – and will also very clearly illustrate to your staff what kind of internal culture firm leadership supports. "Have your practice match your dress code," Kelly said. "It gives clients the impression that your culture is how you practice law."

About the Author

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is what legal firm an essential element: enthusiastic buy-in from firm leadership. "Executives, management and partners have to really participate to make the program work," Ross said, "because everybody takes their cues from them."

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