

Dressing Down is the New Formal Ware

Spending vast amounts of time strapped in a plane seat, I have become a voracious reader of magazines, of every hue and cry (there is so little space even in biz class these days, that reading broadsheets is rapidly reaching socially unacceptable proportions). One of the things I keep reading about is that we are all still in dress-down mode at the office.

What I don't understand is why anyone ever thought that this was a new idea:

- Dressing down in the office isn't new; Europeans have been doing it for generations. Go to Austria, Germany, Scandinavia or Switzerland, in the summertime – not a tie to be seen – although this might be because there is no air-con either. Then take Italy : knowing when to be “formal” or “casual” MUST be an accredited course in the Bocconi University MBA.
- MUCH MORE important: lots of people I know tried it and gave up – it got too complicated and way too expensive.

Let me expand on that. A friend of mine, a European marketing director, has gone back to the dark blue two-piece suit with a huge sigh of relief. When their Brussels' H.Q. went “full-time casual” he tried it for a few days, but found that his casual gear might be great for the weekend barbie in Tervuren, but wasn't cutting the moultarde on fashionable Avenue Louise. The cost of going “formally casual” astounded him and he headed back to the comfort of the suit; relieved colleagues followed.

The other day in Zurich, I bumped into another of my old friends : Tom's level a senior head-hunter (known in airport lounges around the globe as a truly snappy dresser). It was Friday – dress-down day – and what was Tom wearing? A blue suit (well it was verry lightweight Armani and had a lot of cashmere feel to it).

“Tom”, I asked (as we hovered over the little tray – ubiquitous to airline lounges – that has the fixings for Virgin or Bloody Mary's),

“what does this say about you? You are about to get on a plane on a Friday, dressed like a Swiss banker.” His response needs noting by fashion mavens everywhere. “I got up this morning, and I couldn't think what to wear, so I went to the wardrobe and put on a suit. It was easy, there's no hassle, no decision-making?” This from a man, who oozes executive cool.

But wait, there is an upside. Reaching down to a perfectly creased pant leg, he pulled the material gently from the knee upwards. The result? revealed, a \$400 hand-made Italian moccasin – and NO socks. Now that's dressing down with style!

The other issue is when do you change into something else, where's the code of sartorial ethics in all this ? If you are an entrepreneur and the bankers are coming, do you rush home and change ? If you decide that you will work in office casual for a few days and you get called to a big meet with a “stuffy” client, what do you do ? Are there people with huge cupboards in their offices stuffed with different types of career-enhancing outfits ? Is this the beginning of “Clark Kent Syndrome,” where junior vice-presidents leap into the equivalent of phone kiosks and come out in three-piece, lightweight wool, pinstripes ready to do battle with the enemy – otherwise known as the client ?

Maybe that is the way out of the to-dress or not-to-dress dilemma. But there is nothing new in that.

Thirty years ago I was summoned to an interview in London. Clad only in jeans and T-shirt he went into Burtons the tailors with an hour to spare and tried on a suit. “I'm not sure it's me,” I said, “ can I leave you my watch as security and go and show my mother?” They said “yes,” the interviewer said “no”. I told Burtons my mother, “didn't like the cut,” and gave it back.

Dress down ... Just do what makes you feel good. Then again, blue-suit is the no brain option.