

## **Dress for Success**

Do looks matter? If the last American presidential campaign was anything to go by – YES. Sarah Palin's advisors completely revamped her wardrobe (to the tune of €150,000) so that she could make the right impression during her election campaign. Two of our own most prominent leaders took a leaf from the same book. Bertie Ahern is reported to have spent more money than the average industrial wage on make-up, spending an estimated €550 a week on his appearance. His predecessor Charles J Haughey understood the importance of a tailor made shirt and infamously became a loyal customer of Charvet, Paris.

Interestingly, politicians seeking re-election face many of the same challenges as job seekers. Both need to make a strong impact in a short time frame, and must use every tool at their disposal to win confidence and trust. Whilst not advocating excessive spending on grooming and hand-made designer suits, it would be a big mistake to underestimate the impact of that all important first impression.

## **Why is appearance important?**

In today's business world, customers, potential employers and colleagues form judgements on your skills, opinions and capabilities based on your appearance and how you carry yourself.

## **Corporate Image**

In many companies, particularly those in the service sector, employees are an integral part of the corporate branding machine. They are the first contact a potential customer will have with the firm and, as front line staff they are a key way of communicating company values and ethos. As such, their appearance profoundly influences their ability to build a rapport with clients and ultimately to win new business. A professional, well groomed image will inspire confidence in clients thus subtly guiding the outcome of meetings and sales pitches.

## **Psychology of clothes**

How you dress is a reflection of how you see yourself and how you want other to see you. If you have a scruffy, unkempt appearance those you interact with will assume that you lack attention to detail in your professional life and do not take pride in your work. If you look well groomed, the inference is that you will pay equal attention to your work, will care about what you do and consequently will achieve good results. Unfair? Maybe, but none the less a deeply ingrained belief.

## **What to wear**

When asked to give advice on interview dress, I don't like being prescriptive as I always feel that it is important to be yourself. The following guidelines are all common sense but are worth noting.

- Keep the focus on your message, not on how you look.
- If in doubt – keep your interview attire conservative. It shows respect, and the ability to fit into company values and the corporate way of doing things. If you want to show some personality, you can do this by wearing an interesting tie or cuff links. Don't go mad – mavericks are not always in high demand in the market place!
- Colour. For men play it safe – black, navy, dark grey suits. Ireland is still very traditional – a cream Italian suit, may be very dashing but may be a bit “avant guard” for many employers. Women have a lot more flexibility – but again play it safe. Ladies, bring a spare pair of hosiery, just in case.....

In an interview setting, there are all sorts of biases at play and the first thing you need to do is to convince the employer that you will fit into the company and that you are “one of them”. The best way to do this is to look the part. If you are going for a job in an Investment Bank – look like a banker and pull out your sharpest suit and tie. If you are going for a role in an advertisement agency, you can afford to be more creative but you should always aim to look slightly more formal than the interviewer as this shows a mark of respect.

## **Conclusion**

A designer wardrobe was not enough to secure Sarah Palin the role of Vice President, but it certainly helped her catch media attention!

Whilst you will never be offered a job based on what you wear, it *is* important to use your image as an additional communication tool in influencing an employer to hire you.

## **About the Author**

**Laura McGrath** is the owner of *Interview Techniques*, a leading provider of interview coaching services. She has spent the last 15 years in staffing and recruitment and is a regular contributor with *Irish Jobs* and the *Sunday Business Post*.

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