

Entrepreneur March 2011 Article
“Create Credibility, Confidence, and Clout by Looking the Part of a Successful Entrepreneur”

Kate White, former editor of *Glamour Magazine* and author of *Why Good Girls Don't Get Ahead but Gutsy Girls Do* says, “Do you look like you deserve to be a member of the club?” If you are going to play in the big leagues in your business, it's critical to look the part. This is far more challenging for female business owners than for males. Don't get me wrong, there are some men out there doing themselves a grave injustice by their “self-packaging” but for the most part, they are just not paying attention. All they need are some good business suits and some professional looking business casual items and they are “good to go”. You, as a woman owning her own business, it's not so simple.

I know some of you are already irritated with me. I can hear you now:

“That is so shallow! My clothing has nothing to do with the value of my product or service?”

“Not having to wear a business suit is one of the perks of having a home-based business in the first place.”

“I'm not letting anyone dictate fashion to me. I have my own style, thank you very much.”

Hang in there with me a little longer. It is not my intention to try to become the fashion police! My intention is only to give you something to think about and to help you utilize every tool at your disposal to be successful in your business. Consider the time, money, effort, and expertise you have put into your business. Does it make sense to undermine all of that with the mistake of “self-packaging”? On your personal time, you can wear the grubbiest sweats you own if that is your choice. More power to you!

Remember every time you see your clients, your banker, your employees, colleagues, or future potential partners, they are making some judgment based upon your “package”. They may unconsciously be evaluating your competence, your professionalism, how much money you make, your education, etc. I'm not saying this makes it right but it is a reality. This is not about right or wrong, this is about using every tool available to reach High-Heeled Success™.

One of the reasons “packaging” is such a challenge for business women are the goals of the fashion industry. Their job is to market new clothing, new shoes, new purses, and new jewelry to us every spring and every fall. Change, fads, and trends are the continuing lifeblood of the fashion industry. I'm not trying to damage the economy by convincing you not to buy but I am focused on getting you to think about **your business goals**.

Is your “package” forwarding or thwarting your advancement? How do you want to be perceived? What is your industry? Are you in a creative, cutting edge industry like photography, advertising, graphic or interior design? Are you in an extremely conservative industry such as financial planning, or consulting to attorneys? Or are you somewhere in between? Do you want to be perceived as rock solid or extremely avant-garde? Your “package” has the ability to subtly underscore your goals or not so subtly undermine them. One of my clients is an attorney who consults with other attorneys to develop their practices and raise revenue. Can you imagine the reaction she would get if she appeared for a consultation in a flowing skirt, gauze blouse, and gypsy-type jewelry? What’s the message being sent? It would not be the message, “I am a serious, extremely knowledgeable, and trustworthy attorney.” Now it’s unlikely that you are making such a glaring error, but even a slight misstep could work against you?

In my book, *Achieving High-Heeled Success: 50 Ways for Career-Oriented Women to Succeed™*, I describe the uncomfortable task of telling a colleague that her “package” screamed seduction. This was not the image a woman in the financial industry wanted to convey. She just thought she looked attractive. It’s what we don’t know that can hurt us!

What’s a business woman to do? In my seminar “Six Secrets of Successful Women”, I guide participants through the following exercise:

- First, participants list every aspect of their “package”. This list includes everything- shirt, pants, blouse, jacket, sweater, vest, suit, shoes, purse, portfolio, briefcase, backpack, watch, rings, earrings, tattoos, makeup, hair style, glasses, etc.
- Second, participants determine the message they believe they are sending through each item. There is no such thing as neutral.
- Third, participants are teamed with a partner and the partners give each other feedback on what message the item sends from their perspective.
- Fourth, I stand back and watch the expressions, listen to the comments and gather the ahas!

Every time this exercise is completed, the participants get responses from their partners that surprise, shock, and often dismay them. This is a classic case of: “We don’t see ourselves as others do.”

Could you do this outside of a seminar situation? You bet. All you need is a buddy that is willing to give you candid, yet loving feedback and has knowledge of the expectations of your industry. Honesty is essential but it must be delivered in a way that you will accept it. If you get mad and leave in a huff, that’s not going to move you ahead. So choose your buddy wisely.

Here’s something else you may want to try. Get a copy of your local business newspaper. Review the publication for advertisements that include men and women.

Good choices are financial planning companies, banks, and commercial real estate ads. Do a comparison of the “package” of the females versus the males. What do you note? Unfortunately, often you will see evidence of the challenge business women face. In these conservative industries, it’s not uncommon for the men to look cookie cutter professional and the women to stand out as different. In this situation different is not beneficial. Having the “look” that people expect from a successful person in **your** industry is key. Remember, it’s not about everyone wearing power suits. It’s about the underlying message your target market is buying. Don’t shoot yourself in your “High-Heeled” foot with your “package”. Take some time to get feedback and use that feedback as one more tool in your business arsenal.