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Photograph by Ian Macpherson



When the HEAT IS ON

Dressing for business in the sizzle season is considered a challenge by most, especially when professional image is a priority.

What's appropriate, of course, varies between sectors and cities but if a woman has her sights on the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, bare arms and legs, regardless of how flawless and shapely they are, won't necessarily cut it. Nor will polyester frocks and strappy shoes.

So, how do you keep looking smart, polished and cool for business? Dressing for comfort does not mean that dress codes are relaxed. Style does not have to be sacrificed.

Comfort and crease-proof qualities in your business clothes are vitally important. But as Bella Freud, a London-based fashion designer said, "...what's the point in being comfortable if you look like shite?"

The real challenges are:

Q: How to select smart business clothing when so often the fabrics are second rate (and, more often, the price exceeds the quality)?

Summer weight clothing does not wear as well as the winter and it requires more maintenance. Constantly washed or dry-cleaned,

it wears out quicker. Don't expect each item in last year's summer wardrobe to be up to standard again this year. Check it out - and throw it out if necessary.

Q: How much exposed flesh is acceptable?

For the corporate business woman, the more exposed flesh the inference is vulnerability. The same goes for the corporate man. Always have your jacket with you. You never know when you will have an unscheduled meeting that requires you to look prepared for business.

Your clothing (regardless of season) must fit well - comfortably loose. When your clothing fits like a glove, it doesn't allow for free body movement or air circulation. The summer heat is constricting enough, so forget clothing size and go for comfort. Cut out the number in the back of the garment if it bothers you that much!

Q: How to select fabrics that are comfortable and stay looking smart and crease-free?

Natural fabrics (cotton, lightweight wool or silk) are preferable but not always available in business wear. Synthetic blends such as poly/linen blends, microfibre (synthetic wool mix) are a great compromise.

The bottom-line is, the fabric must breath. And - lets just say it - the real movers and shakers in the business world don't wear polyester!

Colourful considerations:

In summer, very dark colours have the effect of making you feel and look hotter. The season suggests you lighten-up in more ways than fabric, texture and weight. Colours which are lighter not only look cooler, they have the ability to 'feel' cooler as well. Mid-navy in lieu of the perpetual black is a better option if wanting to make a strong, bold and quietly elegant statement for summer.

Unless you are scrupulously neat and clean, or eternally optimistic, expect light colours to show the first signs of grub.

Should you choose to wear lighter colours, make sure the garments are at least hand-washable. They will require maintenance almost after every wear.

Other cool ideas:

- Pray that the office air-conditioner keeps working
- Avoid coffee - drink more water (not icy cold)
- Avoid heavy meals
- If you have shoulder length hair or longer - get a hair stylist to show you how to use hair accessories and product to wear your hair up and off your neck.
- Wear fine cotton or luxurious silk underwear. These breathe - nylon doesn't.
- Keep a 'rescue kit' - deodorant, talc powder, spray freshener for the face - at work.
- Take a spare top to work each day to change into after lunch. It's the ideal way to appear and feel fresh like you have just arrived at work. Essential if you do feel the heat, or perspire excessively.

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