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"Fake It Till You Make It—It's Important to Dress for Success, Even During the Age of 'Business Casual' "

Kathleen J. Wu
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Kathleen J. Wu is a commercial real estate lawyer and managing partner of the Dallas office of Houston's Andrews & Kurth. Her e-mail address is kathleenwu@akllp.com. The views represented here are her own and do not represent those of the firm.

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So you're sitting in your office, in your khakis and golf shirt, as comfortable as if you were at home on the couch watching ESPN or Oprah, or whatever your guilty pleasure is, and a client calls. She wants to see you immediately to go over the widget contract. Your client, mind you, works at a bank. A nice, official bank where everyone still walks around in suits and ties. Never fear, you say. In today's more relaxed work environment, my client won't hold it against me that I'm dressed in my firm's officially sanctioned "business casual" attire and she's wearing her \$800 Donna Karan ensemble.

Or will she?

Amid all the hoopla over the wave of business casual policies sweeping law firms, nobody seems to have asked what the clients think. Do they really want the lawyer they're paying between \$200 and \$450 an hour (and more) to be dressed like he just got back from the golf course?

Oh, sure, lots of lawyers say the move to business casual was a reaction to how our clients were dressing. And, yes, many of our clients have adopted business casual policies of their own. But just because many (though not all) of our clients are dressing down, does logic dictate that we should dress down? Not necessarily. They're the clients, you see. The bosses. They're the ones we're supposed to be trying to impress. If I'm paying somebody \$300 an hour, I'd like for her to look as high-powered, intimidating and professional as possible. But there's another reason that lawyers, particularly young lawyers, and even more particularly young female lawyers, might want to stick with more formal attire: It makes you look more like a grown-up.

Being the youngest, least experienced person in the room has certain drawbacks. Nobody seems to pay much attention to what you say, and everybody assumes, correctly, that you're the youngest, least experienced person in the room. Showing up in khakis and a golf shirt doesn't do anything to combat that problem. Even season power brokers look a little less powerful in Banana Republic attire.

Now, this doesn't mean that lawyers shouldn't ever dress down. Particularly on those days when we're doing nothing but sitting at our desks or in the library, surrounded by documents and dusty books, it doesn't do anybody any good (except, perhaps, our dry cleaners) for us to be dressed in our Sunday best.

Ignore the Inner Child

But there are also times we should ignore our inner child and opt for the suit and tie (or pantyhose and heels, whichever the case may be). One of those as I mentioned, is when seeing a client. It never hurts to dress to impress, particularly when the person you're trying to impress is the one who pays the bill.

Something to Prove

The other time to forego your firm's casual dress policy is when you think you've got something to prove. And that goes for most young lawyers, but particularly young women lawyers.

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Granted, it's not fair that the business world requires women to be twice as good as men in order to be held in the same esteem. But that's the way it is. Therefore, it makes sense for young women lawyers, particularly when dealing with those with some degree of power over their careers, to dress to the nines whenever possible.

There's just something about wearing a power suit that inspires confidence, both in the wearer and in the wearer's audience. Feeling confident, even if one doesn't yet have the competence to back it up, can go a long way. It's hard to be intimidating when you look more like a model in a Gap ad than a lawyer.

The "fake it till you make it" rule doesn't just apply to young women. Young male lawyers may also find that it's to their advantage to "look the part" during their early years at a firm.

Three years in law school should have taught us more than just how to research drafting precedent and win arguments with our spouses. It should also have imbued us with a sense of judgment about such things as when to open our mouths and when to keep them shut, or when to go to trial and when to settle.

We should also be using that finely honed sense of judgment when it comes to our wardrobes.