

How to Make Business Casual Work for You

By Jill Bremer, Certified Image Consultant

Today's business environment is anything but traditional. For most Americans, work settings have become more relaxed. Flex-time, job-sharing and home offices have spurred employees to ask for more comfortable dress codes. And corporate America has responded. In fact, "casual Friday" has become "casual every day" for many companies.

The expectation that productivity would increase as a result of this more comfortable work environment cannot be proven. But we do know that employees are happier. We can assume that business casual is here to stay. The problem is that workers have wide-ranging definitions of business casual and few companies have developed adequate dress code policies. The result is mass confusion and mixed messages.

What are needed are clear-cut parameters of the different levels of business casual, as well as guidelines of when and where each level is appropriate. Dressing for business these days has become situational. Traditional clothing some days; business casual other days. In order to decide what to wear, ask yourself the following questions each morning:

- What industry am I part of?
- What is my company's dress code?
- What is my position within my company?
- What activities will I be engaged in today?
- With whom will I be interacting?
- Where will I be meeting them?
- What messages do I need to convey?

The three levels of business casual are Basic, Standard and Executive, and you may have the need for all three in your closet depending upon your position and responsibilities for the day. Keep in mind that traditional conservative clothing is still the best choice when meeting clients for the first time, making a presentation, conducting negotiations or anytime you represent your company off-site and need to convey authority.

First of all, let's examine what business casual isn't. Save the following items for your weekend or at-home wardrobe: zip-front hooded sweatshirts, team jackets, jean jackets, T-shirts with slogans, midriff-baring tops, tank tops, well-worn jeans, spandex pants, stirrup pants, overalls, biking shorts, sweat pants, mini skirts, see-through tops, halter tops, flip-flops, sneakers and sandals. Never

forget that the first word in business casual is "business."

Business casual must always include high-quality pieces, hose or socks, footwear in good repair, coordinated accessories, clean, styled hair and makeup for women. With that in mind, let's take a look at the first level of business casual.

BASIC BUSINESS CASUAL

In most industries, this level is acceptable for those days when you have little customer contact or are taking part in an informal activity. Cleaning-off-your-desk days, entertaining clients at a sporting event or attending an off-site retreat are perfect for basic business casual. This type of wardrobe will convey that you are approachable and friendly. A basic business casual ensemble consists of only two wardrobe pieces, i.e. shirt and pants, top and skirt, etc. A jacket is not worn at this level.

Elements for Men

- Khakis, cotton or corduroy pants, tailored shorts (if appropriate for occasion)
- Polo shirts, lightweight knit shirts and sweaters, turtlenecks, short- or long-sleeve sport shirts, plain T-shirts or sweatshirts, vests
- Medium- or thick sole leather shoes, clean sneakers, loafers

Elements for Women

- Skirts (short or long) in denim, cotton, corduroy
- Khakis, cotton or corduroy pants, tailored shorts (if appropriate for occasion)
- Blouses, short-sleeved cotton shirts, plain T-shirts, turtlenecks, vests, lightweight knit tops and sweaters
- Casual dresses and jumpers
- Medium- or thick-soled leather shoes, clean sneakers, flat trouser shoes

A warning to both men and women: think twice about wearing jeans. Even if your company finds them acceptable, very few body types look good in them. It's also difficult for jeans to look good for very long because they show wear rather quickly.

STANDARD BUSINESS CASUAL

This level is the most accepted form of business casual in many industries. Fabrics and styles are a bit more tailored and upscale than basic business casual. The key element of this level is a third piece which adds a touch of polish and conveys competence. The third piece can take many forms, from a casual unstructured jacket, vest or sweater, to even a tie or scarf.

Elements for Men

- Khaki, corduroy, gabardine, wool blends, flannel pants with more tailoring than Basic pants
- Collared shirts, including Oxford-cloth button-downs, small checks, plaids,

end-on-end fabrics

- Casual jackets
- Pullover sweaters in fine-gauge knits, cardigan sweaters
- Woven or knit vests
- Casual ties -- wool, knit or challis (not silk) in a geometric, club pattern or plaid
- Thin or medium leather or rubber soled shoes

Elements for Women

- Tailored (solid or subtle pattern) pants with a fitted waistline in cottons, corduroy, wools, silks, microfibers
- Skirts (short or long) in gabardine, linen-blends, flannel, challis
- Tops can be woven or knit. Tailored shirts, blouses, shells, high-quality T-shirts, fine-gauge sweater knits
- Knit dresses, jumpers
- Casual jackets -- unlined, unstructured
- Cardigans, knit jackets
- Vests -- knit or woven
- Scarves
- Leather flats or trouser shoes

Note to men and women -- remember that the addition of the "third piece" is essential to standard business casual.

EXECUTIVE BUSINESS CASUAL

Executive business casual is the most formal level and comes very close to traditional business attire. At this level, a jacket must be worn. If you work in a conservative industry, this is your preferred level of business casual. In a creative industry, this could be your everyday attire. In general, clothing worn at this level has classic styling with a contemporary flair. The finest fabrics are used and the pieces include excellent construction and fit. Executive Business Casual conveys messages of professionalism and reliability.

Elements for Men

- Pants in wools, linen, silk blends
- Solid-color blazers, tweed sport coats
- Shirts (long-sleeve only) in solids, stripes, small patterns
- Fine-gauge sweaters can be added over a shirt (or by themselves under a jacket in more creative industries); Cashmere is the fabric of choice
- Ties are optional and can be in whatever fabric coordinates with your ensemble, including silk
- Thin to medium lace-up shoes, loafers

Elements for Women

- Pantsuits, matched or unmatched

- Tailored pants
- Structured blazers and jackets
- Skirts -- short or long
- Gabardine, worsted wools, wool crepe, linen-blends, silk and silk blends are the preferred fabrics for the above items
- Blouses, knit tops, shells, fine-gauge sweaters - in pima cotton, linen, silk, cashmere
- Thin- to medium-soled shoes, flats or low-heel pumps

The emergence of business casual has been a double-edged sword. It first seemed as though it would simplify our lives but it only made dressing each morning more complicated. Since we have so many more options available to us, we have more opportunities to make mistakes. When selecting your business casual attire, remember always to consider your industry, your position and your activities for the day. If you will have any customer contact, think hard about the messages you want to convey and how you can make your client feel at ease. Match their level of dress and the lines of communication will open for you.

Jill Bremer, AICI, CIP, owner of Bremer Communications, helps organizations and individuals create the "look and sound of success". Her company offers group training, private coaching and consulting in professional image development, communications and presentation skills. She is the co-author of "It's Your Move: Dealing Yourself the Best Cards in Life and Work" (Financial Times Prentice Hall, 2004) and can be reached at 708-848-5945 or at jill@bremercommunications.com

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