



Hold the halter tops: What not to wear to the company picnic
Image adviser offers summer wardrobe tips

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It's company picnic time and the living is . . . casual.

But not too casual, says an image adviser who counsels businesses and workers about what's appropriate -- and inappropriate -- to wear at the office.

"It [the company picnic] is about having fun and a good time," Kimberly Law, founder of Burnaby-based Personal Impact, said in an interview. "But you need to think about your credibility while you're doing it."

Law said that with the lazy days of summer upon us, there's more opportunity to wear casual, comfortable clothing such as shorts and t-shirts. While they're okay at neighbourhood gatherings, company functions need a little more care.

"Some people dress like they're going camping. Others dress provocatively. I'm not saying they shouldn't be comfortable, but dressing too casual isn't good. It's important to be clean, neat and tidy. Sexy and frumpy have no place in the workplace and it's the same at the company picnic.

"But there's always somebody who dresses extremely casual."

Law advises companies and staff employees on such things as proper dress and etiquette, both at the office and at office functions. Her clients have included Vancity, North Shore Credit Union, CIBC, several law firms, Simon Fraser University, the University of B.C.'s Sauder School of Business and Blanche MacDonald Centre, where she gives workshops on professionalism to fashion merchandising students.

Law said that just because clothing is comfortable doesn't mean it's suitable for a company picnic.

Hold the well-worn, wrinkled, stained or dirty clothing and opt for something more suitable.

Also, forego tanks, cropped tops, backless and halters. Shorts are fine, but not short-shorts. Walking shorts, bermudas or capris work for women. And quality t-shirts, polo shorts and khakis are fine for men.

"Some men just throw on something that looks like it's been sitting at the bottom of the laundry basket, along with a top with an inappropriate message," added Law.

Another faux pas is advertising or slogans on clothing that not only say a lot about the personality of the wearer, but may hurt the company's reputation. And ensure that the clothes fit properly.

Law said that people don't realize the damage they can do their career by dressing inappropriately at work-related events, including summer picnics.

"You have to think about what it says about your personality. People will remember the person who dressed like a slob or like they're walking the streets. It could have huge implications if upper management is there. They'll see you in a different light."

Law also suggests that senior and mid-level managers in particular should follow her guidelines, because they're setting an example for employees. "If they dress improperly, they're telling everyone that it's okay. It implies that their work is sloppy. It's part of dressing for business, just a different activity. And sometimes they're overdressed [for a picnic]."

Besides dress, Law also counsels businesses on other image matters, including proper etiquette. Picnics are no different, she said.

"Overdrinking is a no-no, for obvious reasons."

She also said that planting yourself by the picnic food table is not the way to eat. "Don't overindulge in anything and that includes food."

And don't forget who you brought to the party, because others -- not just your significant other -- notice. "Include your spouses or partners in conversations. It's awful when they're standing there by themselves."

Paul Caron, managing director of Caron Business Solutions Inc., has hired Law in the past to help his company's 14 employees dress professionally for all occasions.

"We're a consulting firm, so we felt we really needed to look like we acted, to project an image of professionalism," Caron said in an interview. "And clients noticed it. We hear comments that we look professional. No one looked tacky [before], but [dress] wasn't consistent. And staff were wondering, what's appropriate? [Law] looked at everything. Shoes were a big thing. Some came in in sandals and those can be distracting for clients. It looks like they're heading to the beach, rather than work."

And what's right for men at his company? "Men are easier. In one word . . . suits."

Caron said his company is considering organizing social outings, including a company picnic, and would likely circulate Law's rules on "what not to wear at the company picnic" to employees.

"It provides some good pointers. The goal would be to avoid embarrassment."

Caron said that the guidelines make sense, because he recalls some less-than-appealing sights at other company picnics. "In my past experience, I certainly saw some women showing up with something a little too revealing. And sometimes it's scary what a man views as casual. Some of us have legs that shouldn't see the light of day."

In the meantime, he said, the recent heat wave has him looking into what would be an appropriate summer wardrobe for doing business.

Joy McLean, career coordinator for Blanche MacDonald Centre, said in an interview that Law is absolutely right that dressing appropriately for picnics is critical in the business world.

"Small things make huge differences in a career," said McLean, whose company teaches hundreds of students about fashion merchandising and design. "Enjoy yourself, but be aware it's a company function."

McLean said their students need help transitioning from fashion to the business world. "One thing on the wish list in the business world is an awareness of proper dress in all categories, including casual occasions. That [company picnics] is where they make their biggest mistakes."

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