

Women's Business Attire Varies By Region And Industry – And Person

Local Women In Business Fashion Say California Laid-Back Style Comes Through In Professional Ensembles

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The old adage in fashion is “dress to impress.” Interpreting that rule in today’s business world can be tricky, especially when climate and politics come into play. California is known as a progressive state, incorporating personal, eclectic style into business. According to Liz Bordessa, owner of Just Alterations, a style consulting, tailoring and alterations business in Long Beach, “California is such a casual state compared to other states. If you’re in New York and you’re dressing to Wall Street, that’s a whole different animal. I would imagine that in Downtown Los Angeles you would see a little bit of that, probably more so than in Downtown Long Beach.”



This traditional pantsuit is a gray multicolor set by Classiques Entier called “Stucco Mélange.” The jacket retails at \$268 and the pants sell for \$158. Both pieces can be found at Nordstrom. (Photo courtesy of Nordstrom)

This look would be appropriate as traditional business attire. The black skirt suit is by Ted Baker London. The blazer retails for \$230 and the back button pencil skirt sells for \$150 at Nordstrom. (Photo courtesy of Nordstrom)

Traditionally, the standard attire for an interview is a suit. However, today’s focus is on finding the look that fits with the business environment. There are still items that should never show up in the workplace – torn jeans, belly shirts, sweat suits or low-cut tops, just to name a few – unless you’re place of employment is in a surf shop or a bar, according to California State University, Long Beach Associate Professor Suzanne Marshall, an expert in women’s leadership and fashion. Both Marshall and Bordessa agree that the best way to determine what not to wear is by giving the company’s human resources department a call and asking about office dress code.

Across all sectors, color can project a business attitude. For instance, Marshall said some men wear their “power tie,” which is typically a bolder, brighter color such as a red or a yellow. These more aggressive colors command attention, versus wearing a more classic gray.

Marshall and Bordessa said gray is one of the trendiest colors this year. “For a number of years in the past it was brown. Now we’re seeing camel again, but we haven’t seen camel in ages. Now it’s a trend color this



This Ted Baker London draped neck blouse in blue can be worn under a traditional skirt suit for a more conservative look, or without a jacket to show the feminine frills of the blouse. The piece retails for \$145 at Nordstrom. (Photo courtesy of Nordstrom)

year. Navy blue comes and goes, but this year everything is gray. This year it’s both the classy color and trendy color,” Marshall said. Stores like Nordstrom or Jones New York carry the latest trends in women’s professional attire, from pantsuits and skirt suits to feminine blouses and tailored bottoms. These shops typically have in-store stylists who can help coordinate a wardrobe that caters to your career style.

The ‘Wall Street’ Wardrobe

Tradition remains in some sectors, particularly in financial services, law and mental health professions. For such occupations, experts say the suit is a must. Many stylists recommend owning a three-piece suit – jacket, pants and skirt – however the necessity of the pants versus the skirt can vary depending on the strength of tradition in the workplace, according to Bordessa.

One example is one of Bordessa’s tailoring clients – President and Chief Executive Officer Jane Netherton of International City Bank, who has been in Long Beach for more than 25 years. Bordessa said Netherton’s look is very traditional, with suit separates that she wears daily for work.

An impeccably tailored suit can scream success. Marshall said these suits look best with a more inverted triangle fit. “Usually you want the shoulder to be stronger. It usually makes people look better. Most suits have a little bit of padding in the shoulder. If not, it looks droopy,” she says. The shoulder padding is not the linebacker look of the 1980s, she says, but is just reinforcement. “You need to move your arms over your head without your jacket sleeve going up to your elbows,” with the jacket fitted under the arms. Pants need about half an inch in the



This alternative to the more traditional work outfit allows the wearer to show a bit of her personality. The boiled wool jacket is by Classiques Entier in “French” grey multicolor and retails for \$198 at Nordstrom. (Photo courtesy of Nordstrom)

waist for breathing room and should look smooth in the back. Marshall calls this more tailored look “the Wall Street woman.”

Bordessa recommends getting traditional pieces in staple colors: red, black, cream, gray and tan. “If you’re going for the professional style, these are the colors that are going to be in every woman’s closet,” she said. At her shop, Bordessa sees a lot of designers going with a conservative style on the outside of the garment with something fun lining the inside. “A lot of women have fun with that.”

Marshall says dresses are appropriate if they’re the right kind of dress. Bordessa calls these dresses “shape dresses,” which can be something like a sleeveless sheath dress that hits the knee. These pieces can be worn with a blazer or sweater, she said. “There are a lot of designers that have the more silhouette-type style that is fitted, then you can add a blazer to it. It depends on the style of the professional.”

Bordessa thinks women in California are more comfortable in making their look more feminine, whereas women in more conservative locations and businesses are occupied with wanting to be looked at the same as a man. “You want to be judged the same way, so you’re basically taking a man’s suit and structuring it to a woman’s style. I think what you’ll find in California is that it’s ok if you want to add a little feminine touch, and I think there are designers who will help you with that by adding a little bit of detail to that.”

Professional attire is an investment. Bordessa said that because a lot of these clothes and accessories can have high price tags, women want to get a lot more out of their wardrobe. “They want to have some range with it,” she said.

The ‘Creative Woman’ Wardrobe

Other sectors have a more lax approach to women’s business attire, such as in advertising, fashion and journalism. According to Marshall, journalist fashion is more business casual but quirky, fashion industry women make less traditional choices and Web-based companies may have a more lax requirement on workplace attire.

Marshall says the “creative woman” wears trendy colors, boots, sweaters, tights, fur and funky kinds of things – something you might find in a magazine that is a little more casual. Bordessa suggests Vogue magazine’s 2010 Style Guide to get ideas for creative and trendy ensembles.

Both women agree that California style is a hodgepodge of women who are half dressed up, mixing and matching vintage styles and feminine styles with professional looks. “Southern California is much more eclectic because it’s based on a lot of the personality trends,” Bordessa said, “They might wear a red pump with a white blouse, and that might look very smart for them. I think that’s where you might see someone in California more reflecting their personality.”

Women in the creative sector tend to accessorize more with jewelry, hats and purses. According to Marshall, this year’s hat is the fedora. “They went out in the ‘60s for the most part, so when they came in it was a big thing for the hat people,” she said. She also noted that knit caps are becoming more popular. “Hats really make people pay attention to you. You just look different.” Bordessa said she tends to see hats more often in West Los Angeles or in New York.

Shoes can complete a professional outfit and are typically closed toe with a bit of a heel or platform. “You definitely see closed shoes, high pumps in the fall and winter, and then people tend to go to the open sandals in the spring and the summer,” Bordessa said of California style. “Boots are very popular. You’ll see women adjust their skirt lengths depending on the style of boot they’re wearing.”

Professional women are going be in their shoes all day, so Bordessa said women are going for comfort as well as style. “There’s a lot of designers now coming out with the walking type designer shoe where they’re more comfortable.”

Marshall warns that purses can make or break an outfit. “If a woman has a mommy bag with no structure that is just huge and holds everything, it just doesn’t look that professional. Thought should go into the purse you carry.” Practicality also comes into play, and Marshall said a smaller side bag purse could be great in cities because of pickpockets.

Although office environment has a significant impact on a professional’s wardrobe, a lot of what businesswomen wear dictates their personality. “If their personality dictates conservative, then they will dress very conservatively,” Bordessa said. “The ones who have their own personal flair, they’ll find a way to bring out that personality. So much of it is people feel comfortable in certain colors. You’ll see their whole wardrobe; they’ll come in year after, and it will be just certain colors that are their com-



Michelle Leight, an attorney at the Law Offices of Michael Leight in Long Beach, wears a silhouette, sleeveless dress appropriate for a professional business. The client of Just Alterations’ Liz Bordessa accessorizes with a layered necklace, bracelet and watch to give the ensemble a touch of her personality. Leight’s shoes complete the outfit; a professional-looking pair with a rounded toe and short heel. (Photograph by the Business Journal’s Thomas McConville)

fort zone. I guess the biggest thing I see is individuality and people expressing their own individuality and how they like to dress.” ■