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HOW TO DRESS FOR SUCCESS IN ANY COUNTRY

WHEN IT COMES TO DOING BUSINESS OVERSEAS, THE SUIT YOU WEAR SAYS MORE ABOUT YOU AND YOUR COMPANY THAN YOU MIGHT REALISE.

Ask any backpacker with a dog-eared copy of the *Lonely Planet* about appropriate dress, and they'll tell you it's wise to wear long sleeves in Pakistan, remove shoes on entering homes in parts of Asia, and eschew jeans in many US establishments.

Ask a busy executive about the business dress codes of the countries he or she visits, and you're likely to draw a blank. The difference? While travellers have time to study social differences, most business folk are too busy preparing presentations and rushing to meetings to learn what to expect – let alone what to pack.

Yet just as language and social customs play key roles in building global business relationships, the way you present yourself has a real and lasting impact. "I don't know if it would make or break the [business] relationship," says Tom Verghese, director of intercultural management consultancy Cultural Synergies and author of *The Invisible Elephant – Exploring Cultural Awareness* (Synergistic Press Melbourne, RRP \$29.95). "But it will impact how easily the business progresses."

FIRST THINGS FIRST...

"That first impression is vital," says Reny Massoud, a Melbourne-based style adviser. "You don't want to be back-peddling. As superficial as it seems, when people meet you for the first time, they form an opinion in the first 30 seconds."

Research by Malcolm Gladwell, author of *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (Penguin Books, RRP \$24.95), suggests that most of us make instant, unconscious judgements about ▶



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new people based on social norms – which means what you wear could matter more than what you say.

“A lot of how you are perceived will be based on how you’re dressed,” says Verghese. “In Australia, we are far more relaxed in business. People in Asia tend to be more conservative and better dressed. They have a real attention to detail and are very brand-focused, so they’ll notice the wristwatch, belt and shoes you’re wearing. In Australia, it may be acceptable to wear a pair of chinos with a shirt, but that comes across as underdressed in Singapore.”

While a suit and tie are standard in Asia, business people in northern Europe tend to be more relaxed in their dress, and Southern Europeans place a real emphasis on style. In the US, dress conservatively, particularly on the east coast. (On the west coast, it’s jeans and polo shirts, as in the TV series *Entourage*).

THINK GLOBAL, NOT LOCAL

The blanket rule? “Keep your look respectful and classic, and keep loud ties and pointy shoes for after hours,” says Ethan Newton, master tailor at Herringbone – an Australian company renowned for its quality tailoring and bespoke suits.

“Having pieces that easily adapt to different circumstances helps. A dark charcoal suit can cross over from boardroom meeting to semi-formal evening when teamed with a clean white shirt, dark houndstooth tie and white pocket square.”

Neutral colours such as charcoal, black and navy are the key to a great suit – they provide a solid base and allow you to introduce a little colour and personality through your accessories.

Another tip is to take style cues from peers: “Every industry has a dress code, and a common mistake people make is not dressing appropriately for the industry they’re operating within,” says Massoud.

Sartorial success is in the details, he adds. “Clothes need to be well-tailored. If they fit you well and are in a quality fabric, it’s a great starting point.” Skip synthetics and fabrics such as easily-crushed linen, or take the time to have them cared for.”

“Maintaining a sharp image abroad can be as simple as a shoe shine or a pressed shirt,” adds Newton.

Most importantly, plan ahead. “Lack of preparation is a key issue,” says Verghese. So brush up on the dress codes and customs of places you’ll be visiting and consult colleagues who do business there. After all, it’s about more than just looking good. 