

Look The Part

And Stand Out While Fitting In | By Laura Schwartz

As former special assistant to the President and as the White House director of events for the Clinton Administration, Laura Schwartz has created and executed more than 600 White House events. Today, Laura lives and operates her company, White House Strategies, in Chicago. The Networking Power of Social Events© is the title of her upcoming book.

Everything I learned, I learned in Kindergarten. No, slash that. Everything I learned, I learned on Saturday Night Live.

Well, I did learn one very important thing anyway—and that was when Billy Crystal's character Fernando coined the phrase, "It's better to look good than to feel good because when you look good you feel great!"

Do you feel great in what you're wearing today? How many outfits did you try on this morning before going to work? Do you have one along for the after work festivities or will you simply shed that jacket or change your blouse? These are all viable questions to ask yourself when finding your level on what I call "the power meter of appearance."

So, let's go shopping! We're lucky to have the Magnificent Mile in our backyards and incredible boutiques in our neighborhoods. It's high time to "invest" in them all. I'm not just talking the panicked half hour you spend trying to find a suit for a presentation you just found out you'll be giving tomorrow morning. I'm talking setting aside specific shopping days for each season. I recently took a weekend in August equipped with my cutest shoes, best hair and makeup (to make me happy under those harsh dressing room lights) and shopped for three solid days before I dropped. I now feel fabulous every time I go to my closet and put on one of my new favorite outfits.

When you're out in the wild of the Mile, there are eight essential things to keep in mind when perusing for the perfect apparel:



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1. Don't go it alone! I always enlist my sister or a personal shopper to be an objective voice on my shopping escapades. In fact, personal shoppers are an underused resource in our city. Did you know that Macy's (just as Marshall Field's always had) and Saks have personal shoppers who are *free* of charge? Just tell them your price range and they'll help you find clothes you can afford to wear. Yes my friends, enlist them, for they not only know what's hot, they know what will look hot on you.

2. If you're a size 10, wear a size 10! You'll actually look smaller than if you stuff yourself into an eight. If it makes you feel better, take a cue from Jerry Seinfeld—cut out the tag, take a fine tip Sharpie and change the 12 into a 10.

3. Turn around! Those three-way dressing room mirrors are actually four-way mirrors, meaning they're meant for you to look behind. That's right ladies, time to take a deep breath and examine your derrière. Just because you can't see your backside when you're walking around the office doesn't mean coworkers can't. No matter how great something looks from the front, if the back can't do it justice, keep shoppin'!

4. Don't let your height restrict your options. Virtually anything can be hemmed, taken in, let out, etc., etc. The talented tailors and seamstresses of Chicago are the unsung heroes of my wardrobe.

5. News flash: Our favorite colors aren't always our best colors. If you've never had your colors done I suggest visiting a cosmetic counter ASAP. Find out if you're a cool or a warm, then do a little research. Experiment with a friend and find hues that make you pop, not drag you down.

6. Suits...ugh. They're like uniforms for our careers. I didn't like uniforms when I was a kid and I don't like them as an adult. But if you want to be taken seriously in your office and you want to be seen as credible instead of sleazy, save the low cut tops and miniskirts for the weekend. Suits can, believe it or not, be fun. Just because they're the expected form of dress at the office doesn't mean you have to blend in like a soldier wearing camouflage. And you shouldn't! Add a piece of your personal style to every suit such as a beautiful blouse under your jacket, a fabulous lapel pin, a great necklace or, of course, a fabulous pair of shoes. Show off who you are. Nothing says professional can't be fashionable!

7. "Suggested Attire" means know your surroundings (i.e., is the event business casual, cocktail, black tie, creative black tie, green tie, etc.?). When looking for outfits that are appropriate for your surroundings, remember:

- Spacesuits are to the moon what pantsuits are to the office.
- Swimsuits are to the pool what a black crew neck dress is to a business cocktail reception.
- Jersey's are to a ball game what a little black dress with a plunging neckline is to your Friday night date.

8. Finally, just as my dad told me while buying my first car: Never pay sticker price. Splurge where your wallet can take you, but plan your shopping days around savings and sale days. And don't forget to hunt through the racks of clothes for hidden treasures at Chicago's best budget stores.

The Bottom Line: It's time to stand out while fitting in! Remember, you have only a few seconds to make your first and only impression so make it powerful! ■