

Denise Smith Amos

St. Petersburg Times

It has been 15 years since John T. Molloy wrote his first book urging businessmen to “dress for success.”

Since then wars have been won. The AIDS epidemic has changed the way we look at sex. Communism has crumbled.

Never mind such change. It's still a blue-and-gray world in Corporate USA.

Walk down any corporate corridor and you'll see men and women sporting the corporate look of “success” - conservative suits, discreet but stylish ties or scarves, sensible shoes.

“We all look like we were cut from the same mold,” says David Robbins, a St. Petersburg lawyer and president of the St. Petersburg Area Chamber of Commerce. “We're very boring.”

The Power Image of the '90s remarkably resembles the look of the '80s, and of the '70s. That image was largely anchored by a well-thumbed book that Molloy titled Dress for Success.

Dress for Success was the first of many books on “wardrobe engineering,” a quasi-scientific blend of research and intuition that measures people's attitudes and prejudices about dress. Molloy, considered the father of the business, also wrote a book for women titled The Woman's Dress for Success Book.

Most of Molloy's conclusions haven't changed much in 15 years. For instance, he says that a white man in a dark, pinstripe suit still gets better tables in restaurants and snappier service from secretaries than men in brown suits or sport coats. Women and minorities who dress conservatively still stand a better chance at promotions than counterparts who dress like corporate nonconformists.

Let's face it, Molloy says. Most of the decision-makers in business are white men, mostly middle-aged and older. Everybody else - women, minorities, younger white men - should conform to the decision-makers' standards, no matter how biased or old-fashioned they may seem, if they want to succeed.

“We all wear a uniform and our uniforms are clear and distinct signs of class,” Molloy wrote. “We all react to them accordingly.”

Some of Molloy's more surprising research findings: Men in bow ties are considered eccentric.

Men with beards or mustaches are considered untrustworthy.

Women who wear glasses are considered smarter than women who don't.

Brunet women command more authority than blond women.

Gray hair on a man adds authority but gray hair on a woman detracts from her authority.

Many executives still consider Molloy's book a clothing bible. Clearwater real estate consultant Lee Arnold bought copies for all his associates.

“With the turmoil in the real estate business . . . 70 percent of our clients are new,” he said. “Every impression is a first impression.”

But businesswear has taken some unexpected turns lately.

Since the 1970s, women have flooded the workplace, loosening clothing conventions while lowering and raising their hemlines. Businesswomen eventually broke from the regimental uniform Molloy urged - dark suits and gray pinstriped dresses - and determined that they don't have to look like men to compete with them.

“I dress to reflect my own personality,” says Gay Culverhouse, president of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and chairwoman-elect of the Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce. “I feel that's more honest.”

Now men say they are breaking out of the mold, too. They have ditched the red and yellow “power ties” in favor of ones adorned with bold flowers and abstract patterns. They sport patterned socks instead of dark solids and colored or pinstripe shirts instead of white ones.

“If you're wearing a 1989 tie in a 1992 market, it makes you look like you're behind the times,” Arnold says. But the more things change, the more they stay the same.

In business, the monolithic blues and grays still dominate men's suits. Molloy calls it the follow-the-leader strategy - wear what the boss wears, shop where he shops and don't make fashion waves. Men's fashions largely have walked in lockstep with that notion.

When Lee Iacocca and, in Florida, political figures such as Jeb Bush and J. M. “Mac” Stipanovich donned bright suspenders, that briefly became a “power” look. And after decades of pushing the fashion envelope, Johnny Carson (with a little help from Ronald Reagan) finally has gotten brown suits to be acceptable. (They used to connote junior status.)

Even double-breasted suits are embraced now, albeit cautiously. Bankers and accountants would still do well to steer away from them, Molloy says.

As for today's wilder ties, they're a fad that will fade, Molloy says. “Our research shows that 20 percent of male executives are turned off by those wild ties.”

For women executives and executive wannabes, the story is different, Molloy says.

Women have broadened business attire to include tailored dresses, skirted suits and two-piece dresses in a multitude of colors and styles.

Molloy's advice to women: If you work for a male boss who dresses conservatively, wear conservative skirted suits. If you work for a woman who dresses fashionably, follow suit. Fashionable people value that in others and can interpret conservatism as frumpiness, he says.

Molloy preaches a kind of women's liberation from the fashion industry. He advises women to seek classic looks and avoid changing their wardrobe every three months.

“The fashion industry takes items off the rack that aren't what the industry is pushing,” he wrote. “Women should close their pocketbooks if the industry tries that with the skirted suit.”

The fashion world has convinced women to express themselves through clothing and thereby attract attention, he says. But a good business suit blends into the corporate scenery and gives a woman the air of a “team player.”

“If you dress to be attractive then you will be (considered) less effective,” he says.

Alison Bellack, the partnership schools coordinator for the Pinellas County school system, rejects that advice, saying women should wear what suits them best. Bellack, who has fair red hair, says she doesn't own a gray business suit.

“I think I have a uniform; I have a look,” she says. “If it's not becoming to you, it's crazy to wear it.”

For added authority, women should attempt to draw attention to their faces rather than their bodies, suggests Katherine Knowles, an image consultant and personnel director at Isaly Klondike Co. in Clearwater. Women should wear dominant necklaces around the base of the neck, as opposed to dangling down their chest, and coordinated earrings, she says.

Despite such explicit instructions, most working women care more about fashion than function, Molloy acknowledges.

For example, Nancy Reagan is largely credited with reviving the popularity of the red business suit. At a recent Hall of Fame Bowl luncheon in Tampa, a number of women wore red business suits, including Tampa Mayor Sandy Freedman.

“I think 99.9 percent of all women dress for themselves,” Freedman says.

Arthenia Joyner, a Tampa lawyer, agrees. She says bright colors complement her dark skin, but grays and dark colors wash her out, making her less effective.

Even Molloy acknowledges that a boldly colored women's suit will stand out in a room of blue and gray, but it is still risky, he cautions.

Pshaw, says Robbins, the lawyer: “If anything, it's an advantage to a woman to look good in business. If you look good and are good, you are a step ahead.”

“Why walk into a room and be the same as everybody else?” Robbins says. “Men do that because we weren't smart enough to figure that out.”

John T. Malloy's do's and don'ts

for the male executive (or the executive wannabe)

General rule: Follow the leader; wear what the top executive is wearing.

SUITS

DO wear conservative suits and ties. Dark grays, browns and blues, charcoals and pinstripes are preferable. Florida's climate makes lighter colors and khaki acceptable.

DON'T wear so-called fashion suits, those with unstructured jackets, bright colors or the Miami Vice look.

SHIRTS

DO wear white shirts for your most important meetings and sales pitches. White gives the wearer an air of honesty and industry. DO wear other light-colored shirts, the lighter the better, as well as some subdued stripe patterns. DON'T wear red shirts and other dark-colored shirts or shirts with patterns and abstract drawings. Greens and browns tend to make a man look shallow.

TIES

DO wear one. Wear conservative colors in solids and small patterns. There is still power in conservative paisleys, as well as in red and yellow ties.

DON'T waste money on the abstract designs, bright flowers, pastels and otherwise radical ties popular now. They may be a passing fashion and are considered frivolous and distracting in serious business settings. DON'T wear a bow tie unless you need to soften a strong personality. Bow tie wearers usually aren't taken seriously.

ETC.

DO carry gold Cross pens or similarly expensive writing instruments.

DO wear beige raincoats, which convey an upperclass air.

DON'T wear black raincoats; they denote working class.

DON'T wear a beard or mustache. Executives tend to distrust a man with facial hair.

Source: John T. Molloy, author of *New Dress for Success*

John T. Malloy's do's and don'ts

for the female executive (or the executive wannabe)

General rule: Dress for the job you want, not the job you have.

SUITS

■ DO wear skirted suits; they carry the most authority. Choose conservative cuts, not ones that emphasize your waistline or bust area. In Florida, light colors are good, although darker blues, charcoals and grays are best.

■ DON'T wear sweater suits; they are too sexy.

■ DON'T wear skirt and blouse sets because they paint you as a secretary or clerk.

■ DON'T wear panted suits because male executives will think you're trying to be too masculine. Pants also emphasize the body too much to be appropriate for women in the workplace.

DRESSES

■ DON'T wear them unless they are of the most conservative cut. In general most dresses are designed to accentuate a woman's body. The sexier a woman looks the less seriously she will be taken in the workplace.

■ DO wear coat dresses and other conservative cuts. In the South, softer, more feminine dresses are acceptable. Dresses should extend to or below the knee.

■ DON'T wear dresses with flowers and frill. You will be considered frivolous.

■ DO wear jackets with dresses. Blazers add instant authority when they are conservatively styled.

■ DON'T take off your jacket in the office.

BLOUSES

■ DON'T wear frills, lace or ruffles. A simple bow will do.

■ DO wear white or pale blue blouses; they project honesty and industry. Or wear light colored blouses or contrasting colors to accent skirted suits.

■ DON'T wear a black blouse. It offends a large percentage of male executives.

■ DON'T wear blouses with plunging or revealing necklines.

ETC.

■ DO carry an attache case, even if it is empty or contains only your lunch. Dark brown leather with no decorations is best.

■ DON'T carry a purse unless it is a high-quality leather handbag.

■ DO have a credit card (at least one American Express card and one bank card) for paying for business lunches. It also lets a waiter know who is paying, in case he or she automatically hands the check to the men at lunch.

■ DON'T fumble around in your purse for your card. It makes many male executives edgy.

Source: John T. Molloy, author of *The Woman's Dress for Success Book*

Alison Bellack: Coordinator, Pinellas County partnership schools and child care programs She is dressed just right for what she does. She wants to look efficient, but not too efficient. The feminine cut of her suit works on her, but younger and/or buxom women should beware of looking too feminine. — Molloy

Lee Arnold: Clearwater commercial real estate broker and consultant He looks the part. Commercial real estate brokers wear lots of pinstripe suits. Those suits have a richer, more upper-middle-class image to which the brokers aspire. Residential real estate brokers, on the other hand, try to look more approachable. They don't want to look like they'll charge you an arm and a leg in commission. — Molloy

Gay Culverhouse: President, Tampa Bay Buccaneers; Ph.D. in special education Her unorthodox outfit bespeaks her authority, wealth and freedom to change the rules. Ph.D.'s in general are expected to be atypical dressers. — Molloy

Bob Morrison: Tampa trial lawyer His conservative suit and tie work better on a black lawyer than a white lawyer in the eyes of juries (which are usually dominated by whites). It says to black jurors, “He's joined us,” and it says to blacks, “He's made it.” If a white lawyer wore it, it would put off blacks and middle-income and lower-income whites. — Molloy

H.M. Shirley: President, Barnett Bank of the Sun-coast, Weekly Wachee He looks fine, dressed conservatively. The pattern on the tie is large, but perfectly acceptable in today's environment. These days ties are much brighter and gaudier than this. — Molloy

Adela Gonzmart: Columbia Restaurant co-owner, leader of restoration movement in Tampa's Ybor City Gonzmart says she dresses more flamboyantly at night when working at her family's restaurants. The influx of Cuban immigrants brought the concept of dress-up to Florida's nightlife, but many conform during the day, abandoning the Havana look and dressing like the corporate establishment. — Molloy

David Christian: President, Tampa Bay Black Business Investment Corp. In general, people are less inclined to trust someone with facial hair and shaded glasses. On black men, however, beards are accepted in most cases. But Christian's unusually shaped beard draws attention to itself. The beard, combined with the shaded glasses, distracts from his otherwise professional appearance. — Molloy

David Robbins: Lawyer, president of St. Petersburg Area Chamber of Commerce Most good lawyers have two images - one for the judge, executives and other members of the upper class and one for middle-class juries. Robbins handles mostly business clients, so he is dressing appropriately for his clientele. — Molloy