



# The verdict on courtroom fashion

*Attorneys should “edit their outfits as carefully as their briefs,” says one law professor*

*“I like my money right where I can see it – hanging in my closet.”*

– Carrie from *Sex and the City*

BY ANAYAT DURRANI

Lawyers are not typically known for making a fashion statement. But one 20-something lawyer from North Carolina recently made local television news for turning the courtroom into her personal catwalk. The petite public defender is known for her flashy four-inch heels and designer labels that she calls “investment pieces,” proclaiming she could “never do that basic black suit” of the typical lawyer. She said her clothes are her creative outlet, that they give her confidence, and make her stand out. Elle Woods would lock arms with her. Carrie Bradshaw too.

But beyond fictional fashion-obsessed characters like Legally Blonde’s Elle Woods and *Sex and the City*’s Carrie Bradshaw, is it acceptable for lawyers to embrace their fashion instincts and chuck aside the typical lawyer uniform?

“As an attorney it is important to inspire confidence. That includes above all, possessing the skill and know-how in your area of the law,” said Francesca Russo, a Miami-based attorney who runs the Fashionable Litigator blog. “It also helps to look the part. It is refreshing for lawyers to be fashionable. Naturally,

there is a fine line between *fashionable* and *inappropriate* depending on where you happen to be.”

If that happens to be the courtroom, Russo said she would not dress the same way there that she does everyday at the office or if she were meeting with a client. She believes in the courtroom an attorney should dress in a way that shows respect for the court and does not give the wrong image to a jury.

“That does not mean you have to dress in dull gray from top to bottom. You can be fashionable but in order to respect court decorum, think fashionably neat,” said Russo.

## Cracking the corporate dress code

When you think *lawyer*, you automatically think *suit*; that is, the basic suit for males and the skirted suit or pantsuit for females. Cracking the corporate dress code can be tricky. Companies have the right to set rules on dress and appearance. When hiring, companies typically inform new employees about various rules of conduct, hours of work, and dress code usually stated in a written handbook or manual. In the warmer months, many companies sometimes adopt a more liberal approach to the dress code.

Adecco Staffing conducted a survey in June that showed that employees want workplace dress flexibility; 42 percent

surveyed wanted a casual workplace attire in the summer. On her blog, Russo recently proposed that courts should adopt a more liberal approach to tropical formal options. She cited the example of the “guyabera” shirts, also known as Cuban shirts, during the hot summer months, adding, “There is nothing wrong with relaxing the style of clothing in a courtroom depending on the circumstances.”

New York-based attorney Kat Griffin said she struggled to adapt her personal style to the big law culture when she first started out at a law firm. And though she had the requisite suits to wear, she felt they were “more functional than fashionable,” meaning she fit in but didn’t feel like she looked good. Even worse, she was dismayed there was no authority around telling lawyers exactly how to dress. So, in May 2008, she took matters into her own hands and launched her fashion and lifestyle blog, Corporette.com, to start the dialogue.

“I think that for lawyers – who generally are not in court representing themselves – it is very important that they look presentable,” said Griffin.

She said she would caution women about “making a statement” with their fashion for events like court appearances, interviews, and new client meetings “because in those meetings you want the



Griffin



focus on you, not your clothes — your brain, your experience, your acumen.” She said judges and juries might also make opinions about a client and the case when a lawyer’s appearance stands out, adding, “Why chance it?”

“Ultimately, a person’s style is a judgment call, and if your style can be called into question then so can your judgment,” said Griffin. “Lawyers should be very careful that their clothes are making the statement they want them to make — and for most lawyers that would be that you are detail-oriented, composed, and, you know, not getting dressed in the dark every morning.”

### Fashion law

Law and fashion may not seem like they would intertwine. But happily they do. So much so, that a new practice area was created for it. For over 10 years, Law professor Susan Scafidi said she kept a file on the clothing/textile industry in her office, and naturally, the latest Vogue hidden in her briefcase. Scafidi is a pioneer. She serves as academic director of the Fashion Law Institute at Fordham Law School, the world’s first center devoted to legal issues related to the fashion industry. She’s the first professor to teach a course on fashion law and runs a fashion law Web site called CounterfeitChic.com. What does a fashion law professor think about lawyers and fashion?

“Clothing is an incredibly important means of communication and source of information about an individual, so much so that we cover judges in black robes both to indicate their authority and to downplay their individuality,” said Scafidi.

She believes attorneys “should edit their outfits as carefully as their briefs.” What they choose to wear, she said, should read “lawyer first” and for court appearances, for example, they should wear some variation on a suit and “style icon” second, rather than the reverse.



Law professor and courtroom fashionista Susan Scafidi

“Your client may love Lady Gaga, but does she want legal advice from someone wearing a meat dress?” said Scafidi.

This could be accomplished even within the narrow confines of the lawyer look, advised Scafidi. There is ample room for attention to “quality, fit, and personal detail.”

“Gestures in the direction of style are usually more appropriate and effective than extremes,” said Scafidi. “Love high heels? Go for a three-inch or four-inch black pump, not a six-inch glitter-covered peep-toe platform. Crazy for color? Pick an interesting tie, not an acid-green shirt. Think polish, not bling.”

Scafidi said that an attorney donning a suit “is like a soldier putting on a uniform, a baseball player choosing his lucky socks, or a superhero wearing a cape.” And while a lawyer could fight for justice in his pajamas, she said, “There’s an important psychological dimension to looking the part.”

Dressing well outside the courtroom counts too. Scafidi believes lawyers should look relatable to their clientele while still conveying professional authority.

“A lawyer who serves clients in banking is likely to dress differently from one whose clients are in entertainment or software development,” said Scafidi. “A good rule of thumb is to look like a slightly more polished version of your client on a good day.”

### Call in the “Fashion Police”

If fashion isn’t exactly your forte, that’s when it’s time to call in the big guns, the image consultants. Image/Fashion and Personal Branding Consultant Lori Ann Robinson, founder of Burbank-based LAR Consultants knows a thing or two about that. Robinson has worked with lawyers who have been up for promotions and with those just entering into a firm straight out of law school.

“I call it a ‘soup to nuts’ image enhancement. Assisting them with hairstyles, wardrobe, grooming/makeup and business etiquette,” said Robinson. “Often their personal brand is not developed and they seek out my image company to strengthen that aspect.”

When promotions are around the corner, the competition can get fierce, which requires the whole image package to be top notch, she said. Robinson has also worked with lawyers who want to expand their high-end client base and want their wardrobe to reflect their success.

“You have less than seven seconds to make a lasting, great first impression, and most of that impression is visual so tending to your personal brand is key to getting ahead,” said Robinson.

Female lawyers may face more ambiguity than their male counterparts when it comes to choosing what to wear or what message their attire gives off. Everything from the height of their heels to where their skirt hits on their leg has the



potential to send off the wrong message.

"Suits are still the preferred 'uniform' for lawyers in most cities. If the office is a bit more relaxed, an upscale casual is the way to go. Still looking like a professional is paramount," said Robinson. "Suited looks do not need to be drab and dull. I work with my clients making sure their accessories reflect their personality. Men can expand their shirt and tie wardrobe while women can use jewelry, belts and scarves to ramp up their look."

Regarding heels, Robinson said the best practice is a reasonable heel height, adding that she has been told that judges tend to notice shoes, therefore "erring on the side of classics would be a better choice." She said wearing jewelry and make-up is a good idea and as long as it is polished, understated and elegant, jewelry is a plus. Robinson believes all women should wear a touch of simple, natural looking make-up, which she believes will complete the look.

"Wearing your best power colors will always make you feel confident. Neutrals are often considered best practice in the law profession. Adding a touch of color that compliments your skin tone will give you that individuality," said Robinson.



Weiss

Certified image and wardrobe consultant, Susie Weiss of Susie Weiss Wardrobes, of San Carlos recently held a "Lawyer Networking Luncheon" in August on how to create a winning business wardrobe. She has

worked with women across a variety of industries and having personally worked in the high technology industry herself has shockingly seen women come to work in everything from jeans and sandals to miniskirts and low cut blouses.

"Whether we like it or not, clothes talk. And the way we dress communicates to others how we feel not only about ourselves, but how we feel about them," said

Weiss. "It's critical for lawyers, in particular, to gain the trust of their clients and in some cases, jurors. Something as simple as wearing the right colors can accomplish this. For example, black, burgundy and red are power colors and communicate strength and credibility, attributes that most lawyers find desirable."

Some would argue that dressing well doesn't always matter when it comes to success. Take for example Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, whom Esquire magazine in 2010 named its "Worst Dressed Celebrity." Zuckerberg has a penchant for flip-flops, sneakers, baggy jeans, hoodies and ill-fitted blazers. GQ magazine just voted 27-year-old Zuckerberg the "worst dressed man in Silicon Valley." Zuckerberg has an estimated worth close to \$18 billion. Does it matter?

In court it does. Rapper Lil Kim, rocker Courtney Love and actress Winona Ryder sought designer Marc Jacobs for a neat appearance for their court dates. The same goes for Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan, whose choice of more formal clothes were necessary to soften their party girl images.

### "Power dressing"

Not surprisingly, in the world of image consulting, many attorneys walk among them. Attorney William Cane of Manhattan Makeovers specializes in helping clients look good, from attorneys to businesspeople to artists. The Manhattan Makeover team and Cane, who goes by the pen name of Michael Christian, has helped over 3,000 people and appeared on more than 100 radio and television shows, including CBS "This Morning," "The View," and "Today." The company said it differentiates itself from the others because its image consulting comes from rigorous testing and research.

"Attorneys who think they're making a fashion statement are actually making a fashion mistake," said Christian. "The clothes that test well in a courtroom are

standard fare: for men, blue and gray suits; for women the power suit."

The Manhattan Makeover Web site quotes Judge Edward M. Ginsburg who once said that he has personally found over time that "the very best lawyers are very professionally attired. There is a relationship between their appearance and the quality of their presentations." The Web site also mentions the importance of an image consultant, citing Marcia Clark's image make-over during the O.J. Simpson trial which softened her look and in turn changed her demeanor.

Christian said attorneys face three hurdles: relating to judges, gaining client trust, and maintaining an edge vis-a-vis opposing counsel. He said that's where image consultants come in to help lawyers overcome these obstacles and dress for success inside and outside the courtroom.

"Conservative ties are best for men. Women should not try to wear shoes that match their outfits; instead they should wear traditional pumps with low heels," said Christian. "High heels are a mistake. The best shoes for women are dark pumps with heels no more than two and half inches."

Their survey of 1,000 corporate and legal professionals showed that 55 percent of respondents believe women should wear pants to work, which Christian calls "a mistake." The survey revealed that 14 percent said they should not, which Christian thinks is the correct response, adding, "Judges and jurors respond better to female attorneys in skirt suits."

His survey also showed that only 22 percent said women should not wear high heels to work, which Christian believes is the correct response, saying, "Shoes that test best for female attorneys are pumps with low heels." Only 12 percent of respondents had a beige raincoat, which Christian said is the best color, because "beige raincoats tests best for business wardrobes."

San Diego-based attorney, Katy Goshtasbi, is founder of Puris Image and



San Diego attorney Katy Goshtasbi

works with business owners to refine their personal brand. Her clients range from lawyers to dentists to engineers.

“Lawyers, like all other professionals, didn’t get the training on how to sell well and reflect their business brand well through their personal brand,” said Goshtasbi. “That’s where my company comes in to assist and develop a personal brand for lawyers and other business

owners. There are tons of lawyers out there. How does the public decide who to work with?”

Goshtasbi works with lawyers to understand that “people buy people and not the service of a lawyer.” Therefore, she says, the entire personal brand of a lawyer is extremely important in ensuring that potential prospects and clients “stop and notice you as a lawyer, then decide to do business with you based on your competence.” She said part of an attorney’s successful brand is their appearance.

“Wardrobe is not about vanity and being vogue, but about an optimal level of performance based on being dressed in a manner that helps the lawyer build self-confidence and then exude that self-confidence,” said Goshtasbi. “If you look good, you feel good and you do your job as a lawyer well. I like to call it ‘power dressing’ so you radiate confidence, success, and even clout, if that is your personal branding goal.”

Wearing the same dark suit will not get a lawyer noticed or remembered, said Goshtasbi. She said lawyers should dress for their personality and comfort zone, following the rules but also standing out with their personal brand as a unique lawyer.

“Many lawyers would rather ignore the topic of attire and branding and stick to their substance and education,” explained Goshtasbi. “The most important

thing for all lawyers who consider clothing frivolous and not really related to their marketing and business development is this: When I first see you, I know nothing about you except what I visually see. Develop your own intentional personal brand or else others will brand you.”

Most would agree that dressing like “Cosmo girl” Elle Woods, in her designer threads and signature pink, is extreme. Dressing well doesn’t have to mean fashion overkill – although Woods can be credited for developing a personal brand that worked for her, at least in the fictional world. Attorneys can and should find their happy medium.

“At the end of the day, our profession relies on the theory that the best argument wins,” said Scafidi, the fashion law professor. “Wrapping that argument in the right package offers an important advantage.”



Durrani

*Anayat Durrani is a professional freelance journalist with a Master’s degree in Journalism and International Relations. A versatile writer, her work has been featured in publications worldwide, including Cairo’s Al-Ahram*

*Weekly, California Lawyer Magazine, Caesar’s Player magazine, and 944 Magazine, among others.* ☒