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For Associates, 'Business Casual' Holds Traps

By **Shannon Henson**

Law360, New York (August 27, 2008) -- As new associates try to make sense of their law firm's vaguely worded dress policy – if they are handed a policy at all – they should keep two simple concepts in mind: Get noticed for your work, not your dress, and dress for the job you want, not the one you have.

Consultants agreed that dressing in a post-dot-com world can be a confusing proposition, especially for young female lawyers who face more sartorial choices and are confronted with conflicting messages from their peer groups and other sources.

"A lot of associates are in the dark," said business communication trainer Gretchen Neels, the founder and president of Neels & Company Inc. "They receive mixed messages through the media, and they get into the actual job and are so busy trying to do a good job that the whole wardrobe thing falls through the cracks."

The determination of what is appropriate attire varies from law firm to law firm, with white shoe corporate-based firms likely desiring their attorneys to dress the most formally. However, most firms – like Clifford Chance – look for attorneys to adhere to a business casual look.

The firm's policy says that every employee should maintain a business-like and professional image in the office. Employees should wear "business casual attire that is tasteful and neat." Formal attire is required for client meetings.

Mike Kachel, a firm spokesman, said that Clifford Chance hasn't had problems with employees failing to adhere to the policy. Lawyers should certainly be ready "to suit up when appropriate, but we want it to be a comfortable place to work," he said.

Most law firms moved to business casual about a decade ago amid the rise of the dot-com

companies.

"Firms were losing their talent to Internet companies, which were full-on casual," said Brian Dalton, law editor at Vault.com, a career information media company. "So in the late 90s, firms moved that way seemingly as a survival method."

Neels said that attorneys during the dot-com boom would go to meet with their technology company clients and "feel really out of place." Along with the shift came an office populace that wanted to be comfortable while working – especially when putting in such long hours at the office, Neels said.

But some attorneys drive right past the comfortable exit on the business casual freeway. "I had a firm that had to come out and say, 'No yoga or gym clothes,'" Neels said.

She also said that young professionals are too focused on what their friends and co-workers are wearing. "They say, 'I am going to wear Uggs because they are so super cool, and Patty and Donna have them too.' They don't think that those people two steps above them are saying, 'You have to be kidding me! What do they have on their feet?'"

Other potential clothing traps? Cleavage, the wearing of flip flops and the visibility of thong straps and "tramp stamps," or tattoos on the lower back, Neels said.

The policies of many law firms are vague at a time when many people aren't clear what constitutes business casual in the first place. The policies "tend to limit themselves to words like tasteful and appropriate," Dalton said.

Gail Madison, the director of the Madison School of Etiquette and Protocol, said that business casual is technically no tie and a polished loafer for men. For females, it's dress pants and a less formal blouse.

"But that's not what people think it is," Madison said. "It's still a nice shirt and dress pants, but a lot of people show up in jeans."

Neels said that many firms make the mistake of assuming that attorneys and employees know how they should dress. "If only I had a dollar for every time a senior partner said to me, 'She showed up in a low-cut blouse or she showed up in flip flops and should have known better.'"

Consultants agreed that women have a harder time with attire than men, mostly because

they have so many more choices. The decision for women is simply more complex than whether to wear a tie or not.

Men "put on a shirt, pants and shoes," Neels said. "But with women there's capris, shorts, trousers, skirts, dresses ... When some people are overwhelmed with choices, they don't make the right ones."

For those who toe the line of permissibility, the costs may be subtle – including irritating the boss.

"I've heard that partners are complaining about associates looking slovenly and having no idea of the concept of appropriate attire," Dalton said. "They fret over what the clients will think, especially considering the rates they are paying."

Neels said that an inappropriately dressed employee will rarely get called on the carpet. Instead, a senior partner may not include that associate in a client meeting or ask him to accompany him to court. She said a boss wants someone he can be sure will be appropriately dressed.

"That person may not be the smartest or the brightest, but it's a whole lot easier and a whole lot safer," Neels said. "I think people miss out on opportunities because of their appearance and may not be aware of it."

The consultants agreed that young attorneys should want to be known for something other than what they wore to work last Friday.

"You want people to take you on your work product and intellect. Clothing shouldn't be part of the equation," Neels said. "You want to dress so that nobody notices."

Dalton said, "Don't try to express yourself sartorially. You're in the wrong business if that's what you want to do."

That doesn't mean that an associate shouldn't dress with her aspirations in mind. "You want to dress for the position you want to have," Madison said. "If you want to be a senior partner, dress that way. Perception is reality."