

Dressing for Success

http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2011/10/14/essay_on_how_to_buy_interview_clothing_without_spending_a_lot_of_money

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By *Lee Skallerup Bessette*

It's that time of year again: job application season. But this column isn't about the job application itself; it is about dressing for your interviews. I highly recommend reading **Karen Kelsey's advice for a successful conference interview**, especially when she emphasizes that you should aspire to look *not* like a graduate student but a potential colleague. This advice is not new; anyone who has ever been to a disciplinary meeting can pick out someone interviewing from all those (sometimes literally) unwashed tenured masses who are not.

She closes her post with the following:

"One of the saddest sights in the hotel conference hall is not so much the sloppily dressed interview candidate, as **the ineptly dressed interview candidate** — the one in the brand new, too-cheap, shiny, ill-fitting suit with too-short sleeves and too-long pants, rushing through the halls clutching a fake-leather briefcase. That person smells of desperation. Don't let it be you."

But how can a graduate student or underemployed adjunct afford, after paying to fly out to the conference, the hotel, the food, and (possibly) childcare, to look like "you are already employed"? How can you avoid the ill-fitting suit, the too-short pants and too-long sleeves? By starting to worry about (or, more positively spun, starting to plan for) what you are going to wear right now. In October. With many weeks or even a few months away from interview time -- and you may not even know if you have one yet.

One of the reasons graduate students/adjuncts show up in inappropriate clothing for their interviews is because they put off worrying about it and dealing with the issue until they have heard, in many cases at the last minute, that they indeed did get an interview. An interviewer will never know if are staying far away from the conference hotel because it was cheaper or all that was available (or both), but they can spot the suit that you just grabbed off the rack because you needed something to wear before getting on the plane the next day. Clothes become simply "good enough" and not the best they could be.

I hear it a lot from graduate students/adjuncts that they just don't have the time, money, or the interest in finding a suit for their interviews. Others try to defuse the question by pointing out that they should be judged by their qualifications, not how they are dressed. Still others bristle at the requirement that they dress in a suit while their potential future colleagues (and current supervisors/coworkers) dress in jeans and ill-fitting outfits themselves.

The reality is that there is a certain etiquette to be followed when it comes to dressing for interviews at the conference and on-campus. You are more than welcome to try to transgress that etiquette, but the job market being what it is, do you want to take that chance? Why give a hiring committee an excuse not to fly you in on its dime for an on-campus interview?

The first concerns about time, money, and interest are legitimate. Let's start with interest. This isn't a full makeover. This is finding one (or maybe two) outfits that fit, flatter, and are appropriate for a job interview. If you are interested in getting a full-time, tenure-track job, then you should be as interested in finding this outfit as you are perfecting your C.V., cover letter, teaching statements, etc. And it doesn't have to be a chore. I know that shopping isn't everyone's idea of a good time, but think of it as an opportunity to apply your critical thinking skills differently. An exercise in ethos.

One of the reasons it is so important to start planning now is because one of the most important sale days is almost upon us: Black Friday. If you are looking to pay the lowest price possible for your outfit, Black Friday is one of the best opportunities to do so. Don't worry, I don't expect you to go out at 4 a.m. to join the stampeding hoards; the Internet is just as good if you're patient and wait for Cyber Monday (the following Monday) or starting looking at your favorite department

stores or clothing brand's websites to see when the sales are scheduled.

But, you say, I don't know if the clothes will fit or look good on me. Again, this is why it's important to plan ahead. Plan a trip to the physical stores ahead of time, on a weekday morning if possible, and try stuff on. Make note of the sizes, the model, and the brand label. Take pictures of the tags with your phone to keep on file. Then, find the outfit online. Compare prices between online retailers, sign up for store/designer newsletters, and find the best price you can when you can. Often, you can find a place (or a code) that will ship for free.

If you have no idea whatsoever how to dress your body, then start watching "[What Not To Wear](#)." Seriously. Especially for women, this is the best place to go for ideas on how to dress your bodies. You don't even need cable (or to watch a whole episode), since the highlights are streamed online. Take notes. Get ideas. Find a friend who knows about clothes and take them with you on these shopping trips where the intention isn't to buy but to explore and find what works. And, above all, don't take it personally. It's not your fault that all clothes don't fit and look good on you; find what does work and stick with that.

Above all else, check return rules. By planning ahead, you can get the clothes, try them on, and then return them if they don't fit. Another trick is to call the customer service representative when you return an online item to make sure that if you're getting a different size, it's at the same price as you paid the first time, even if the sale/deal/special is over. In this present economy (and with Internet retailers encroaching on traditional stores' customer base), more traditional retailers are working hard to keep your dollars with them.

But you should also use these more no-traditional online retailers to your advantage. Sites like [Ideeli](#), [Gilt](#), [Ruelala](#), and [Haute Look](#) are online outlet malls (full disclosure: if you join the sites using the links I provided above and do eventually buy something, I get credit on their site; this is one of the ways I am building my interview and professional wardrobe. And you can do the same. Once you join, send an invitation through e-mail to friends, post it on Twitter and Facebook, and link it on your blog. Anyone who buys using your invite gets you credit, too). These sites offer excellent discounts, and ideeli is also starting to offer sales for plus-sized and petite shoppers. These sites are for men and women.

But if you still want to shop for yourself, in a store, and try the clothes on, you can plan a trip to an actual outlet mall. Again, by planning ahead, you can find a group of people who would be interested in driving out, splitting the cost of gas, and generally supporting one another. Before you go, check online for coupons and other special deals, and look at the list of stores available. Make a plan to go the places you absolutely want to look through. Look at the map and decide the order in which you are going to shop. These are not trivial matters; outlet malls can be overwhelming, so if time is truly your concern, then you have to make the most of the time that you have.

Consignment stores and Goodwill are also excellent sources of affordable clothing. As the recession has left many professionals (unfortunately) unemployed, plenty of them are selling off their former wardrobes. And, you're recycling. Many consignment stores will give you cash or store credit on the spot if you bring in some of your old clothes to resell. But remember to be critical and to keep your standards high; just because it's a great deal doesn't mean that it's a great piece or outfit for you. You need to make sure that the outfit flits and flatters you, at any price.

But even an outfit that doesn't fit and can't be returned isn't a total waste. Resell it on eBay (another great place to get great deals on clothes) to make some of your money back. Just because it didn't work for you doesn't mean that it won't be someone else's dream outfit. And, before you give up on an outfit completely, find a good tailor and see what he or she can do. Even if the outfit does work, most of the time the pants will be too long and need to be hemmed. But sleeves can be shortened, waists taken in, and small rips repaired. A good tailor is your best friend when it comes to potentially saving an outfit. But it can't be done without enough time and pre-planning.

But now comes the money part. How are you supposed to pay for all of this? To this, I have no easy answers. Start a fund or a separate bank account. Ask for money or gift cards for

birthdays and other occasions, and make sure the money is used for clothes. Ask for an advance on money that would otherwise have been spent on Christmas presents to be spent leading up to the big interview(s). Again, planning ahead can save you money because you have the luxury of shopping around, comparing prices, returning items, and generally just not getting stuck with whatever your roommate/mother/brother/partner had in the back of their closet. And a good-quality outfit can be reworn multiple times. Switch up the accessories and voila! A whole new look.

Wait, did I not mention accessories?

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