

Get dressed for success

It's all about knowing when to fit in and when to stand out, writes **Sue White**.

As the weekend approaches it's easy to start winding down at work with thoughts of barbecues, boardies and thongs but don't let your comfortable clothing bleed into casual Friday.

"The definition of 'casual' varies from workplace to workplace," stylist Ben Angel says. "It's really important for employees to ask the boss what is standard in your workplace." Especially, it seems, given the statistics.

Last year's Reuters/Ipsos poll on workplace attire found 70 per cent of Australians surveyed believed those wearing business attire were more productive than casual dressers, with almost half believing casual dressers would never make it to senior management in their workplace.

"The unfortunate truth is that looks do matter," Angel says.

According to him, this is because perception heavily influences reality. "A lot of people think we're beyond our primal programming but our minds seek to find congruency between how someone looks and the role they play. Where there's a fit, there's instant credibility," he says.

One person who can spot good workplace attire is Cheryl Lin. As a blogger for businesschic.com.au, Lin is regularly seen chasing after those who get office dressing right. "I take photos of people I think

pull it off, then post them on the blog to try to give people a visual of what works," she says.

While Lin's job as an arbiter also lets her observe workplace fashion from the inside, she agrees we often get "casual" wrong at work.

"Guys wear weekend wear as smart casual; they'll turn up in an old pair of sneakers that have been overworn," she says. "For women, problems come when they try to put in pieces that are too fashion-forward. Shorter skirts, particularly high heels, or very dangly earrings become distracting," she says.

Lin's top tip for avoiding the casual-clothing trap relies more on elbow grease than styling skills.

'General grooming is important, as is good hygiene.' Cheryl Lin

"In smart-casual, people think they can get away with not ironing but that's not the case," she says. "When in doubt, iron!"

At pharmaceutical company Sanofi-aventis, business casual is official policy.

"For men it means tailored shirts and trousers and that ties are optional," the HR director for Australia and New Zealand at Sanofi-aventis, Ronan Carolan,



says. Like many companies, Fridays are dress-down days, so does that mean T-shirts are in?

"We suggest collared T-shirts but jeans and sneakers are fine," Carolan says.

The company has a dress code, mainly to remind people "it's not beach attire", but Carolan says breaches are rarely a problem. He believes the company's expectations are clear enough for staff to know what's appropriate.

"Wearing a suit here won't get you a career but we ask people to dress for the audience," he says.

Staff dealing with customers on a Friday are expected to dress for the occasion.

"If they're seeing a client they should be wearing business attire," Carolan says. "It's about mirroring what your customers do."

If your organisation isn't as clear as Sanofi-aventis about expectations, the following advice should help.

"Ninety-five per cent of people need to get their clothes tailored in some way," Angel says. "Men in particular think if they're in a suit it looks credible but that's not the case if it's ill fitting."

Angel believes it's particularly important for women to make sure they find a cut and shape that suits their body shape.

"Many women believe black can cover a bit of extra weight. This rarely works; it's about finding well-fitted or semi-fitted clothes that give us some shape," he says. "It makes us look better dressed and changes the impression we're delivering."

Lin agrees "It's part of your visual branding," she says.

Lin says men and women shouldn't focus on clothes alone. "General grooming is really important, as is good hygiene," she says. "These simple things can sometimes let people down."

Regardless of the day of the

week, work dressing should involve some forethought but those trying to get to the top in a hurry shouldn't abandon casual Friday for a suit.

"It's about knowing when to stand out or when to fit in; but mainly you want to be versatile in the environment and adapt to what's required," Angel says. "I've always been taught to be the first or second-best dressed person in your environment. You can still be casual but be the first or second-best dressed person, regardless."

If perception really does inform reality, thinking about the big picture should be part of personal dress code.

"Remember, getting to the top is less about fitting in than positioning yourself as if you belonged there all along," Angel says.

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A neat tie-up... general grooming is just as vital as dressing the part.

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