

Would you hire these people?

Experts offer new grads tips on how to dress for job interviews

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Elizabeth Ventura was ready for her first post-college job interview. The University of South Carolina grad had confidence. She had poise. She had a really nice pair of jeans. The medical spa where the 22-year-old Rock Hill woman was hoping to land work was modern and trendy. Ventura figured it was the kind of place where a cute jacket, heels and jeans would make a great first impression. Elizabeth's mom, Linda Ventura, thought otherwise. "She freaked out," Elizabeth said. "She told me it doesn't matter how dressy they are, you never wear jeans to a job interview."

Mothers everywhere, prepare yourselves for this next part. "I ended up taking her advice," Elizabeth said. "And I'm so glad I did." Ventura went to her interview in black dress pants, a crisp, white, long-sleeved shirt, and black, closed-toe heels. She wore a pearl necklace and earrings. She got the job. Elizabeth's mom can't save everybody. So we've gathered advice from area experts on what high school and college grads should -- and should never -- wear when trying to land that first job.

If it's "hot" it's wrong!

If there's one thing interviewers and style advisers said again and again, it's that **a job candidate will never get points off for appearing a bit too conservative -- but looking too casual is a killer**. "Show them your cute, funky wardrobe later," said Betsy Olinger, founder/coach of Marketing-U (www.marketing-u.com), a Charlotte-based executive coaching firm. "If it's something you think you look 'hot' in, it's wrong."

Caroline Schuster, recruiting manager for Wachovia Corp.'s capital management group, said most people she interviews dress well. That wasn't always the case in her former life as a tech-firm interviewer. "I had people come in wearing a T-shirt and a pair of Bermuda shorts," she recalled. "My recommendation to people is go a little bit more conservative than might be your natural inclination."

Terri Moore agreed. Moore, program manager for college relations at the Charlotte corporate office of Time Warner Cable, interviews students for internships. She doesn't eliminate would-be interns for not wearing suits. But when people dress questionably, she isn't afraid to call them on it.

She recalled one candidate whose resume was excellent. "But he came in with jeans," she said. "I did ask him if he thought the jeans were appropriate. He said he saw people in this building before in jeans and he thought he could wear jeans. I told him, 'They have a job and (you) don't.' " This is an incredibly important distinction that all interviewees need to remember.

Schuster noted that dressing professionally applies to any interview -- even ones that take place in college campus job fairs. Enough students do it right, she said, so recruiters notice those who don't.

There's a magic to a jacket

As some workplaces relax their dress codes, fresh-from-school job candidates may cringe at the thought of laying out money for a suit or other conservative clothes they don't expect to wear much once they get the job. But image experts and recruiters alike said the clothes are an investment, and investments -- good ones, anyway -- pay off.

"There's a magic to a jacket," said Susan McKeithen, managing director of Style Advisors, a Charlotte image consulting firm. "There's something about a jacket that implies authority, that implies confidence and professionalism."

That kind of confidence will help a new hire move up, said McKeithen, who with her partner, fellow managing director Susan McDonough, advises graduate students and corporate employees. "Even if you get a job, you're always being considered for that next opportunity," McKeithen said. "You need to dress for the next job. The pressure is not off."

Of course, there are exceptions to the suit or jacket-and-tie rule. "We always enjoy the kids who show up in a three-piece suit," said Carl Showalter, president of Showalter Construction Co., a Charlotte firm that does site work for commercial, public and highway projects. "We give them a hard time." But Showalter still wants to see a conservative look, even if "conservative" means something different in his business. "A nice pair of khakis, a collared shirt," he said. "No flip-flops, no tank tops, no shorts." Showalter looks for a "clean-cut appearance," which in his book, means a fresh haircut, shined shoes and little or no jewelry.

Local experts say most interviewees know to cover tattoos and keep body jewelry to a minimum. The same professional clothes that helped a candidate win the job will help him or her represent the firm well to the outside world, said Moore, the program manager for college relations at Time Warner Cable in Charlotte.

"If you're in a good company and they really want you involved in the company, you're going to be networking," she said. "I would have a problem with a student who shows up in very casual wear for a networking session." Think. What image are you projecting on behalf of the company?

Elizabeth Ventura, who is hoping that her first spa job will lead to a career in the field, said she scouts sales and is patiently building a professional wardrobe as her budget allows. "If you want to be taken seriously, you have to be dressed appropriately," Ventura said. Even if it means taking advice from your mother? "Definitely," she said. "Your mom knows."

BUILDING A BASIC INTERVIEW WARDROBE

- **If at all possible, buy a suit.** Experts agreed that the suit is still the price of admission to much of the work world. Even if once you land a job you only pull it out for weddings, funerals and future interviews, it will be worth it.
- If you're clueless about what looks good on you, **head to a store where seasoned professionals** can lay out options and advise. One suit, with different ties (men) or different blouses (women), will serve you well again and again.
- For women: **Pantsuits are perfectly acceptable**, and may be more versatile than a skirt suit.
- **Best colors** for both men and women are black, charcoal or light gray. Navy is next-best. One exception: At least one expert said she doesn't expect someone fresh out of high school to wear a suit, though it would still impress.
- If you forgo a suit, or it's not right for the industry you're headed for, then as **a bare bones alternative, put together some separates, and include a jacket**. Men should get a white dress shirt, a tie, black, charcoal or navy slacks, and a jacket. Women should get a jacket and skirt or pants. Be aware that for some interviews -- say for a mid-level-or-up bank job -- separates might appear too casual. For some industries, such as construction, a jacket may not be necessary.
- **Get good shoes, and keep them shined.** Don't undermine a great look with shoes that are in disrepair or just plain wrong such as Docksidors, sandals, flip flops or anything you'd go biking or hiking in. If you can only afford one pair, get black.

TOP TIPS FOR A FLAWLESS LOOK

Find a trusted adviser who understands the industry you're interested in and/or knows what looks good on you and show your planned outfit to that person, said Susan McKeithen, managing director of Style Advisors.

Choose clothes that make you feel good. This doesn't mean "that make you feel loose and relaxed." But clothes that make you feel smart, energetic and confident give you "one less thing you need to worry about," said Caroline Schuster, recruiting manager for the capital management group at Wachovia Corp.

Stage a dress rehearsal, said executive coach Betsy Olinger of Charlotte's Marketing-U. Put on the clothes you intend to wear, the accessories, the shoes. Drive to the interview location, so you know how far you'll have to walk in the shoes you're wearing, and where you'll park. Do this far enough in advance to correct any problems.

TOP MISTAKES

Local experts in interviewing and dress say these are the problems they most often see:

1. **Wrinkles.** No, the jacket won't disguise a wrinkled shirt beneath. Yes, people notice wrinkled pants.
2. **Dirty, damaged, or inappropriate shoes.** Clean, professional looking shoes complete your professional look and show you pay attention to details.
3. **Too casual or trendy.** If you would feel comfortable wearing it to a bar, a nightclub, the beach or a ballgame, it's wrong for an interview.
4. **Wearing "the best" or "most expensive" items in your wardrobe.** A cocktail dress is a cocktail dress, not a professional look.
5. **Trying to be "one of the gang"** Dressing like the people already working at the company isn't good enough. The dress code may be casual or the atmosphere artsy, but people expect interviewees to look more conservative.
5. **Clothing that is too tight, too revealing, or too short.** Dress to fit your current size. Squeezing into something too small never works.
 - Men, don't try to wear a tie around a collar you can't button.
 - Women, if someone can see up it, through it or down it...NO!
 - Skirts and shirts that are too short or revealing never work professionally. When you sit, a dress or skirt hit or cover your knees.
 - Shirts should cover bellies and shoulders.
 - Ladies and gentlemen - no pants that droop and show your under garments. If you're wearing a thong or going commando – we should not be able to tell!
6. **Heavy fragrance.** No!
7. **Cells.** Nowadays, cell phones are practically part of the wardrobe. Interviewers said that to their shock, a lot of job candidates leave them on -- and get calls -- during the interview. **NEVER, EVER FORGET TO TURN OFF YOUR PHONE IN AN INTERVIEW OR MEETING.**