

I Know I Packed the Wrong Thing

You can usually find it – buried in the fine print of the conference brochure next to the name of the hotel or the phone numbers of the preferred airline. They're just a few words. Why is it that they can so quickly strike a note of discomfort for the reader? Attire for the meeting: *Business Casual*.

There it is. The first test of a meeting. Never have two words meant so many things to so many people. In Dallas, business casual means designer clothes off the rack rather than specially ordered. In London it means forgo the tux, tie, and spats for the duration of the meeting. In Northern Wisconsin, a clean Green Bay Packers sweatshirt is perfectly acceptable. In your bedroom, as you try to pack, it means confusion.

Some people believe that business casual is part of a grand conspiracy. Just as we all suspect, florists must have encouraged Valentine's Day to ensure the bottom line of their businesses. The cynics are convinced that Hallmark must have provided the money behind the lobbying efforts that legalized all those days – Mother, Father, Grandparents, not to mention Secretaries and Boss' Day. The thought of organizations adopting business casual must have been music to the ears of companies like Gap and Dockers. Call the toll free number of Levi-Strauss and they'll happily provide you with their multi-page guide to dressing business casual!

Unfortunately, their booklet, while filled with ideas, won't reach you in time for this meeting. You have some options. One of the most often used strategies involves packing everything you own, arriving at the first session early (without wearing your nametag), peeking into the meeting room and if your choice was wrong, running up to your room, dipping into your extensive wardrobe and changing.

Another popular choice is to pretend you didn't read the casual part and dress like you were going on a job interview. This choice, while safe, often makes it harder to bond with the rest of the group – especially if they're decked out in Dockers and Tommy Hilfiger shirts.

You could follow the words of wisdom uttered by an experienced conference attendee, gray at the temples, "Just wear what you'd wear to your Country Club." Wonderful, assuming of course, you have a Country Club.

So, what's a meeting attendee to do? After years of attending meetings and observing outfits that work and don't work, here are a few guidelines that will make packing easier.

- If you have a question about what business casual means in your organization, do what questions are designed for, ask it! Call or talk to someone who's been a part of the company for a while and whose style is one you admire.

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- Whether you're male or female, it's hard to go wrong with something that fits the chinos and a golf style shirt mold. Depending on the meeting's location, time of the year, and room temperatures, a sweater is a perfect addition.
- Speaking of room temperatures, count on them being either too hot or too cold – usually both. Dressing in layers you can put on and take off will help you stay comfortable.
- Jeans usually don't qualify as business casual, but pack them along with your recreational gear. Hopefully you'll have time for activities that get you moving.
- Walking shorts and sandals are perfect when you're meeting in a resort atmosphere. This is common sense when the outside temperatures are higher than the age of the people Willard Scott introduces on the *Today Show*.
- Too much skin, however, is usually risky. You're better off leaving the tank tops, halters, and short shorts at home.
- Since food is a big part of meetings, you might consider those items in your wardrobe that have an elastic waistband...but that's another article.

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