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Look Like You Mean Business in Europe: Dressing the Part

by Maureen Costello

When it comes to etiquette and presentation, Americans doing business in Europe face an uphill battle. However, following some basic guidelines can help you make a good impression on even the most critical Europeans.

When in Rome...

Europeans take more pride in their dress style and focus on it more intently than most Americans do. Yet, even among Europeans, there are significant differences in how people from different countries dress for business – and how other Europeans regard them.

Italian businesspeople are respected throughout Europe for their polished, confident, yet approachable look. While the French are also known as good business dressers (with a heavy emphasis on scarves for women), their general look is considered more austere.

The fact that the French and the Italians are snappy dressers is hardly a shock. However, you may be surprised to learn that most Europeans – including the British, the Irish and the Scottish – have embraced high style and developed refined taste in business clothing.

American businesspeople with experience in Europe often say they have learned a great deal about how to dress appropriately in that context simply by observing their European counterparts over time. In fact, if you're doing business in a particular country over a prolonged period of time, it makes sense to be aware of the basic styles of native businesspeople and adapt subtly without feeling uncomfortable. (If you're not sure whether you can pull it off easily, it's always safer to stick with the classics.)

It's the Shoes!

Despite their differences, there is one thing that almost all Europeans focus on above all else when assessing someone's status based on their presentation, as they often do. As Nike has said – it's the shoes! (But obviously not sneakers!)

Europeans in business wear shoes of high style and good quality, and they keep them polished and clean at all times. They believe that Americans wear dirty, unpolished, overly casual, and—worst of all—unfashionable shoes. In fact, a top American executive working in Europe says her number one tip for American businesswomen is “Wear nice heels, for goodness sake!”

An Australian executive who recently moved to England concurs. “Before I upgraded my completely inadequate wardrobe, the first thing I had to do to redeem myself even the slightest bit in their eyes was buy a gorgeous pair of shoes. Then I remade my wardrobe as my salary allowed. But the shoes were definitely the key.”

To impress your European counterparts, then, you may want to spend the extra money on a great pair of shoes, and then keep them polished and looking like new. When they get even the slightest bit raggedy, it's time to replace them. Most Americans probably wouldn't notice, but Europeans do.

And some final thoughts about shoes – Europeans find it rude when people touch or point with their shoes, show the soles of their feet, or take them off. One of the biggest faux pas someone can make in Europe is slipping



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their shoes off to get comfortable or putting their feet up.

Typical Americans

Good grooming is absolutely crucial in Europe, who expect nails to be clean and manicured—and that goes for men as well as women! Sloppy, dirty clothing is also shocking to them.

Europeans consider wrinkled and baggy clothing characteristically American. They say they can tell American businessmen by their overly casual, ill-fitting clothes. Europeans have noted that American businesswomen wear their hair down instead of back like Europeans, tend to wear their blouses untucked, and combine too many colors, patterns or design elements (pockets, ruffles, etc.) in their outfits.

A good rule of thumb when dressing for business in Europe is to dress a little more formally than you normally would, and to go for simplicity of style and a single color or perhaps no more than two shades of a color. It is wise to err on the side of caution—in this case, conservative dress. Also, avoid synthetic fabric, and instead choose cotton or wool.

Safe outfit for an American businesswoman in Europe

- *Simple, matching suit (with a skirt, not pants) in a single, neutral color.*
- *Simple, stylish blouse in a good material—tucked in.*
- *Hair pulled back.*
- *Good quality heels that are currently in fashion without being trendy.*
- *If you want to get creative, add a matching silk scarf at your neck.*
- *For special evening events, like the theater, you can't go wrong with a conservative, stylish black dress.*

Safe outfit for an American businessman in Europe

- *Fashionable, well-fitting suit in darker colors. How do you know if it doesn't fit well? That's easy – if you bought it off the rack. Almost no one finds a perfect fit that way! Fortunately, most major stores do basic alterations at little or no cost. And make sure the suit is pressed or steamed before wearing it.*
- *Shiny, polished shoes.*
- *A conservative tie in almost any color but blue.*

What to Avoid at All Costs

If you want to fit in as a global citizen instead of standing out as a characteristic American, avoid wearing the following:

- *Blue jeans.*
Jeans are more universal now, especially among the young in Europe, but they should be avoided for business.
- *Baseball caps.*
These are American hats for an American sport. You won't see many people from European countries sporting these.
- *Brightly colored golf shirts.*
Simply put, bright = loud!



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- *Khaki cotton “Dockers.”*
Men in Europe wear darker wool trousers to work.
- *Topsiders or Docksiders.*
These boating shoes are associated with the United States and yachting.
- *Button-down shirts.*
This style was invented by Brooks Brothers in the United States but is not commonly worn in Europe.
- *Sneakers.*
These shoes are used for athletics only in Europe and appear too casual for business.
- *Cowboy hats, boots and belt buckles.*
Avoid wearing anything with all-American symbolism—for work or for casual sight-seeing.
- *U.S. flag pin.*
An overt gesture when you are trying to build cohesion with your European colleagues.
- *Logo T-Shirts.*
Mass consumerism is frowned upon.
- *Overly tight tops for women.*
Revealing tops may lead people to infer that you are more interested in pleasure than business.
- *Blue ties.*
Currently, wearing a blue tie is widely associated with our current president, whom a majority of Europeans dislike, according to recent polls. Many Europeans are able to separate their feelings about Americans from their feelings about our president and his foreign policy, but wearing a blue tie will spark unpleasant associations for them.

are unpolished and poorly thought out,” says an American saleswoman who has worked in Europe for many years. “The positive spin would be that we are more focused on the substance than the style, but basically after seeing the thoughtful, impressive presentations they create, I really have to agree with their interpretation. Americans should recognize that the look and style of their work speaks volumes to the Europeans in addition to the content.”

In terms of behavior, many Europeans feel that Americans are overly friendly—smiling, laughing and saying “thank you” too often for their taste—and that we are, at the same time (somewhat paradoxically), rude. Consider the “loudness” issue. Americans speak at a much higher volume than our European counterparts. For example, a crowded restaurant in Europe may seem strangely quiet, almost silent, to an American who’s paying attention. European children appear to cry almost in whispers. Conversely, to them, our speaking voices sound like shouting, so our natural speaking style comes across as rude

In many European countries, it is considered rude to speak or laugh loudly enough in restaurants for people at the next table to follow your conversation—or to speak at all when entering older hotels, which don’t have insulated walls, after early evening. Even when you’re aware of this difference, it’s hard to train yourself to speak quietly because it doesn’t come naturally to us—you just have to keep catching yourself and modulating your voice. It’s important to remember that older office buildings may not have walls as insulated for sound as our buildings—others may be able to hear you, even an office or a floor away!

When working with Europeans, it’s important to take the time to develop relationships instead of just pushing ahead with the to-do list.

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Beyond Appearances

Europeans’ attention to style when it comes to clothing also extends to business presentations. “They think in general that our presentations

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As Americans typically do business first and socialize later, we may come across as arrogant and driven, so make sure to pay extra attention and respect the people and cultures around you. Avoid comparing European ways unfavorably to those of Americans, and always pay careful attention to names and titles. Many Europeans take great offense if you call them by the wrong name, use their first names in inappropriate situations, or refer to them by the wrong title. Also, be careful not to act overly familiar, which seems disingenuous, or come on too strong, which makes many Europeans uncomfortable. Give them time and space—business can wait. If you push too hard, you might lose them.

“If you act too friendly too fast, you may get that deer-in-the-headlights look, and pretty soon they’re running for the door,” an American sales trainer cautions. “I tell all new people that, to work effectively with Europeans, we have to learn how to tone down our personalities the same way we tone down our outfits.”

Good Manners

In Europe, if someone offers you food or drink, by all means, take it (without gratuitous comments on your typical diet or fear of carbs or food allergies)! And appear to enjoy it, even if you really don’t. Turning down food or drink or acting like it is distasteful is considered to be extremely insulting.

Also, learning the European method of eating is wise. It requires less shifting of utensils between hands, allowing you to call less attention to yourself—hence fitting in better with Europeans. And one final thought—avoid chewing gum. Europeans consider gum chewing to be a low-class, and stereotypically American, habit.

In general, if you want to make a good im-

pression on Europeans, tone down your social and visual style to dress and act a little more formally and subtly than you would in America, and be sensitive to acceptable behaviors around you. If you follow these simple guidelines, you will help to reverse some of the negative stereotypes Americans have to deal with when doing business in Europe. □

