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January 15th, 2009 | 6:00 am

## [Embracing Femininity at Work: A Matter of Opinion](#)

filed under [Featured](#), [Office Politics](#)



*by Anna T. Collins, Esq. (Portland, Maine)*

On December 23, 2008, the Daily Mail [reported](#) that image consultants hired by the British law firm [Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer](#) had allegedly advised women at the firm to wear high heels with skirts rather than trousers to “embrace their femininity.”

A Freshfields spokesperson said: ‘In reference to the Daily Mail article we absolutely don’t recognise the characterisation and certainly don’t endorse the points made. As part of the firm’s pre-induction programme for trainees we do run a session which focuses on how best to project a professional image within the workplace. It is designed to give trainees an insight into all the different aspects of creating a professional image – their feedback is always overwhelmingly positive. We encourage trainees to take away from the session whatever they find useful. We don’t have a set of hard rules but do provide some advice.’

When **Emily Keimig**, a management-side-only labor and employment lawyer and partner at [Sherman & Howard](#) in Denver heard about the Daily Mail article, she was wearing four-inch heels with jeans and a long sleeve t-shirt. “It was a holiday week and the office was quiet,” Emily recalls “My point is this: I like to wear high heels. I guess that means that, on some level and in someone’s opinion, I embrace my femininity.” While Emily may be embracing her femininity, she confides that thinking about employers advising women to dress in this manner “got my blood pumping a bit”. This was because she wondered whether a new wave of lawsuits would erupt against employers who promote such policies.

Beyond concerns about lawsuits, some believe it is not necessary for women to dress more feminine to succeed. When workplace consultant **Gretchen Neels**, President of Boston-based [Neels & Company, Inc.](#) suggested to a group of summer associates that they should spruce up their wardrobes by wearing pantyhose and high heels in certain circumstances, their reaction was not positive. “Actually,” Gretchen recalls “they were ready to feed me to the lions”.

Perhaps those women agree with **Ellis Carter**, an attorney at [Fennemore Craig, P.C.](#), the oldest law firm in the state of Arizona which has a gender neutral dress policy, who would not work for a firm that required women to dress more feminine. “In my opinion,” Ellis explains “an employer’s role is simply to ensure employees are professionally dressed. Beyond that,

employee dress is a matter of personal taste.”

Some believe that dressing feminine is counter-productive. [Patti Wood](#), a body language expert, believes that the more space you take up, the more powerful you appear to others. Patti thus disagrees with the conclusion that heels will make a woman appear more powerful because “standing in a skirt and high heels results in women using stereotypic female leg stance with their legs closer together, whereas wearing low or no heels allows woman a broader more powerful stance.”

Patti acknowledges, however, that attractiveness has been shown in the nonverbal communication research to have enormous persuasive power. Perhaps this is why not everyone is troubled by the notion of dressing more feminine. Nicole Williams, founder and CEO of [WORKS](#), describes herself as a “huge advocate of dressing ‘feminine’ and using sex appeal, *subtle* of course, as a means for success. “The truth is that your career is based on leverage,” she explains, “and your femininity is one of the assets you can use to your advantage.” **Beverly Solomon**, former model and business manager of artist [Pablo Solomon](#) agrees. “As someone who deals in the business of fine art, my philosophy,” Beverly explains “is there’s more power in heels than in Birkenstocks.”

### “Feminine” Has No Objective Definition

Certified Image Professional [Linda Thomas](#) believes that “just as ‘casual’ has many definitions and has created a lot of confusion in the workplace, ‘feminine’ needs to be clearly defined or it could also create a different version of confusion in workplace attire.” A review of opinions certainly underlines Linda’s concern.

### Fashion Feng Shui

**Evana Maggiore**, Founder & President of [Fashion Feng Shui International LLC](#) defines dressing more feminine as adding “design elements into one’s business attire that incorporate ‘yin’ energy. These would include the use of more fluid fabrics, curved style lines and flowing shapes.” Evana explains that traditional business attire has long been rooted in masculine, or “yang” design elements. She recall the trend of the 1980s, which dictated that professionals wear structured silhouettes, angular style-lines and firm-finish menswear fabrics. “This style fostered left-brain directed career people,” she continues “the current move from masculine to feminine represents a shift to a right-brained approach to doing business. This shift, which incidentally doesn’t have to be limited to women, supports the move out of an economy and society towards a more creative era.”

### Lasting Impression

For **Deborah Bateman**, EVP and Director of Sales and Service Strategies for [National Bank of Arizona](#), high heels and feminine suits are “a business advantage, especially in making a first or lasting impression”. **Emily Keimig** describes making such an impression: “This morning at Starbucks a lawyer from another firm told me that my shoes were ‘sweet’; so when he refers me that new sex discrimination case that his office can’t handle, I’ll chalk it up to the success of dressing more femininely.”

### Individual Brand

For some, dressing more feminine means embracing the aspects of fashion that enhance one’s appearance, confidence, and projection. Deborah believes this works because it contributes to one’s individual brand. “One of the nicest compliments that I have received in my career was from a CEO as we were discussing a new career opportunity,” she shares “As I recall, he said ‘Deborah you have been very successful and you have made a difference for our team – and while I appreciate everything that you have done and that you will do for us, I respect you because you have done all this without losing your femininity.’” What she heard him say, Deborah continues, is that while she was a valued member of his team, she had participated on her own terms by being herself.

### Respect

**Heather Wagenhals**, Owner/Designated Broker of [HO Real Estate and Investment, LLC](#) in Scottsdale, Arizona believes people respect a woman who “isn’t trying to be something they are not, like a woman dressing like a man”. Nicole Williams agrees: “I am a confident, self-respecting woman and I expect nothing but the best from myself and those around me.”

### Professional Still Important

If women choose to embrace their femininity, experts insist they must be mindful to dress professionally. As **Tamsin Fox-Davies**, of [Enthuse Marketing](#) in the UK explains, there is a misconception that feminine work-wear has to mean spike heels, thigh-high skirts and plunging necklines, which she thinks can harm a woman’s professionalism.

**Heather Wagenhals**, who was voted best dressed businesswoman in Phoenix in 2001, recalls how she

learned to be both feminine and professional. “When I was a young smart aleck stock broker in the nineties I thought I would reinvent how women were perceived and try to break the mold and wear more provocative things to work,” Heather explains. As a result, Heather experienced harassment and was not taken seriously. “A lovely older woman took me under her wing,” Heather shares “she gave me some harsh but wise advice about the difference between being feminine and appropriate versus what I was exhibiting.”

### Not For Everyone

**Lauren Stiller Rikleen**, Executive Director of the [Bowditch Institute of Women’s Success](#) and author of “[Ending the Gauntlet: Removing Barriers to Women’s Success in the Law](#),” highlights that “to suggest that women should be wearing clothes that would otherwise make them uncomfortable is counter-productive.” The issue of heels is particularly troubling to Lauren, as most women she knows are trying to get away from the notion that they need to wear uncomfortable footwear to meet someone else’s idea of femininity. “I would rather think that women have finally progressed to a point,” Lauren proposes “where we can help make the 5 inch heels obsolete by – shall we say – voting with our feet.” As **Roxy L. Rowton**, Principal Image Consultant at [Everyday Refinement](#) believes, many feel that a woman’s clothing should be a natural expression of her own personality and strengths rather than something that makes her uncomfortable.

### Dressing Smart

Despite disagreements about whether women should dress more feminine, the bottom line for many experts appears to be that dressing *smart* is the key. As Tamsin Fox-Davies concludes, “I don’t feel that women should be instructed to dress ‘feminine’ by their employers. However, dressing ‘smart’ can and should be required for many, if not most, companies.”



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1. [Bev](#) Jan 15, 2009 at 2:46 pm

Hi Anna,

Great article on a subject that is still controversial after all these years. In my opinion, if a woman doesn’t have the confidence to dress like a woman, how can men have confidence in women.

2. [do i look bothered?](#) Jan 15, 2009 at 3:51 pm

Who cares if a man has confidence in a woman? it is that sort of approval seeking daddy syndrome that keeps women in the lower ranks and makes them turn against each other when they should be helping each other out.

3. [Grace Judson](#) Jan 15, 2009 at 4:43 pm

I think one of the smartest things I ever heard anyone say about appropriate professional dress for women is:

Don’t be distracting.

This means, don’t be distracting to others by, for instance, wearing clothing that’s too tight, too short, or too plunging. If you’re fidgeting with your clothing, then it doesn’t fit right and it’s distracting to others. If