

Dear Pat,

I am a new attorney practicing in Albuquerque. My new job in the legal profession will require me to make regular appearances in court on behalf of my clients. Most of the clothing in my wardrobe is probably too trendy to wear in the courtroom. I need some advice on how to begin building my professional wardrobe without breaking the bank.

Signed,
Albuquerque Associate

Dear Albuquerque Associate,

The Local Rules of the Second Judicial District Court require attorneys appearing in court or in a judge's office or chambers to "dress in a manner befitting the dignity of the court." However, the Local Rules do not elaborate on specific dress requirements for attorneys. Most new attorneys in Albuquerque probably learn what to wear by observing their colleagues at work and in the courtroom.

Last fall, I attended a Professional Attire Program presented by the Committee on Women and the Legal Profession, the Women's Law Caucus, and the New Mexico Women's Bar Association. The program featured a panel of judges from the federal and state benches who gave very helpful advice about appropriate professional attire for attorneys. The panelists, noting that an attorney's appearance in the courtroom is very important to her clients and to jurors, recommended that attorneys should dress conservatively in the courtroom, and their appearance should convey confidence, preparedness and respect for the judicial process. Dressing professionally and conservatively is one way in which attorneys can demonstrate that we respect and value our clients and our profession. Conservative attire is also a good way for a new attorney to appear more experienced; whereas, dressing too trendy might highlight a new attorney's inexperience.

For attorneys who are beginning to build a professional wardrobe, I recommend purchasing classic suits in dark colors, readily available in local specialty stores and department stores. Lately, I've also seen affordable suits offered for sale in stores such as Target and Kohl's. It is important that the suit fits properly. Ask your friends or colleagues to recommend a good tailor who can alter items and achieve a proper fit at a reasonable price. If possible, purchase the matching jacket, pants and skirt, which will enable you to change your look without having to purchase another suit.

If you have difficulty finding or affording suits, then purchase separates. Men can purchase two or three jackets in dark colors and pair them with slacks and a variety of shirts and ties. Women can pair jackets with slacks, skirts and dresses. Women can also add variety to their wardrobes by purchasing shirts and blouses in various colors to wear beneath their jackets.

Courtroom attire should always be clean and pressed. Necklines and hemlines should be conservative, and you should avoid distracting accessories. Always keep a jacket on hand in your office for emergency hearings.

I also recommend visiting the Professional Clothing Closet, established by the Committee on Women and the Legal Profession and free for law students and members of the State Bar who are in need of professional attire. It contains a wide variety of new and gently used professional clothing. To schedule an appointment for the Professional Clothing Closet or to obtain a DVD of the Professional Attire Program, contact Jocelyn Castillo, jocelyn@moseslaw.com.

Good luck as you begin to build your legal career and your professional wardrobe.

Sincerely,
Pat