

Verdict: Guilty of crimes against fashion

Introducing Lexi Legis, solicitor/fashionista about town, who in this edition negotiates the complex rules and etiquette of dressing for court...

As a female solicitor, I must grapple with many pressing issues on a day-to-day basis: Is my career heading in the right direction? Am I doing enough to further my education? Will I ever leave the office on time? And, of course, the inevitable daily dilemma over what to wear each morning, and the three big questions we should all be asking ourselves:

WHEN IT COMES TO SHOES, SKIRTS AND SHIRTS: HOW HIGH IS TOO HIGH? HOW SHORT IS TOO SHORT? AND HOW LOW IS TOO LOW?

Let's face it, there are some very bad fashions on display daily in court. Rarely a day goes by when I do not see some poor, misguided woman wearing heels that look as though they'd be better suited for walking the streets of Kings Cross, or clothing that really stretches the bounds of decency. But these are the extreme examples. The more perplexing cases are far more subtle.

Take me, for instance: My view is that, in this modern day and age, it is no longer necessary for female solicitors to wear strictly conservative office attire (that is, a crisp, long-sleeved shirt, a tailored dark suit, stockings, and closed-toe court shoes. I loathe stockings and wear them only in times of cold weather when I figure that they're preferable to goose-bumpy legs. Similarly, I can't abide bulky man-style shirts, which are incredibly hot in summer – particularly distressing when the court's air-conditioner is on the blink. I much prefer a more snug-fitting, and yes, perhaps, ever so slightly low-cut, top.

However, there is certainly no consensus *ad idem* about the suitability of such 'modern' dress among other female colleagues. And I don't pretend to know what our male colleagues think. (Will we ever know how men think...? That's a whole other question.) My friend, Miranda, for instance, is of the firm view that classic conservative dressing is still a must for female solicitors attending court and, in particular, that it is a serious violation of an unwritten law for a female solicitor to enter a courtroom with legs not covered by nice, sheer 10-15 denier stockings. Mind you, Miranda would also have it deemed mandatory for every man to be impeccably dressed in a dark suit (no lairy stripes), a crisp hand-pressed shirt with French cuffs, stylish cufflinks matching a tie that sits perfectly to the belt line with a double Windsor knot.

While Miranda and I have our differences, we do agree on a number of general rules for courtroom attire, namely:

1. No skirt should ever be shorter than mid-thigh. (Though Miranda would advocate for a more modest standard of only a couple of inches above knee).
2. If you are going to wear a short skirt, you cannot wear a low cut top at the same time (and vice versa).
3. There is no limit to heel height as long as you can walk in them. But, in general, it is a fashion faux pas to wear a shoe with a platform sole over 2cm in height unless going clubbing. Use some commonsense when it comes to high heels, ladies – if you can't walk in your shoes with some style, elegance and grace, and you're not able to keep up with your brisk-walking barrister, then they are probably too high for you. Of course, having said that, if this were to occur I would expect said barrister to slow down to a pace you could keep up with so as to not cause embarrassment (not to mention a slow down in briefs).
4. This one is highly controversial as I've seen some females pull it off really well, and I don't mean to offend those that can do it, but knee high boots are a no-no for court. Tucked neatly under a pair of trousers sure, but with a skirt suit we're in the 'no' camp.
5. If you are going to wear stockings, do not wear stay-up stockings or suspenders with a skirt that is so short you can see the tops of the stockings – that's just trashy! A slight hint of lace, when crossing the legs at the right angle, is perfectly acceptable if you are trying to seduce your drinking partner over a vino but is never, never appropriate for court, client meetings, interviews or, in fact, any day-time meeting when you don't want to be mistaken for using your sexuality to get what you want.
6. When you are in court, you should have your arms covered (Miranda believes a jacket is mandatory whereas I am ok with a nice cardigan). Our advice is to keep a spare black jacket behind your office door for those 'Oh my god, is that in court today?' days.

If you can stick to these general rules then, regardless of whether you opt for classic-conservative chic or something a bit more modern and edgy, you should avoid offending the fashion police in the courtroom. ■

Do you agree with Lexi's views? Disagree?
Please write to the editor with your comments:
renee@lawyersalliance.com.au.