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ImageRules

There's a time, place to show off cleavage; office isn't the place

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I recently received an e-mail from a reader asking me how much cleavage was appropriate at work. Or, she wondered, was she just old-fashioned? I like to think that when it comes to appropriate dress I am not old-fashioned at all, but I believe any cleavage at work is too much.

I am surprised at times at what I see teens and young women wearing. Last spring I was out to dinner with a group of friends and we saw a group of high school students out celebrating prom. I loved prom. I fondly remember both of my prom dresses.

I could not believe how much cleavage these teenagers were showing! It frightens me to think about the first time my sons bring a date home, because if I see that much cleavage, I might have to keep my sons home from the party.

Enough about teenagers. What about appropriate dress for young, female professionals in the workplace? Our society appears to be becoming more "asset" focused. I hate to sound like my mom, but MTV and Hollywood have been a big influence on today's youth.

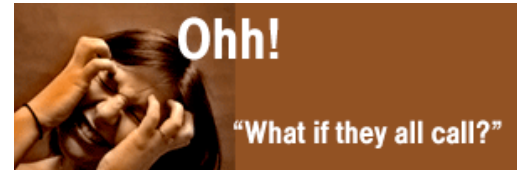
There is a time and place for showing cleavage, but the office is not the time or the place. Remember, our image and the messages that our image sends can have a powerful impact on our career path. Credibility in the workplace can be compromised when we choose to dress provocatively. For women, clothing covers 75 percent of the body, and the goal is to have co-workers and associates paying attention to the face and what is being said, not what is being displayed. Women who choose to display their cleavage run the risk of alienating the women they work with and diminishing their power with the men, because the cleavage can be a distraction.

How much is too much? Clinton Kelly of TLC's "What Not to Wear" suggests that the cleavage is too low when soft tissue begins to show.

So what is the proper procedure for employers to handle employees who choose to dress inappropriately? First and foremost, employers should have a dress code in place. Employers do have the right to restrict or prohibit inappropriate dress among their employees, and written guidelines with consequences is an effective way to implement a company dress code. Another way to handle the sticky issue of proper dress code is to get professional consultation to communicate what is proper and improper.

Jill Haney's Cincinnati-based business, JH Image Consulting, conducts individual and corporate group training on appearance, behavior and communication. She is a certified image consultant with the Association of Image Consultants International. Reach her at 513-505-2732, jill@jhimage.net or www.jhimage.net.

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