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MATERIAL GIRL

What should the professional secretary wear? How much should it cost? Where can you buy it? Alexander Baron, fashion journalist, has the answers.

How should a secretary dress? Over the past thirty years or so, fashion has gone through one revolution after another. We've had mini-skirts, maxis, the midi, women wearing trousers, men wearing dresses, hot pants, jumbo and button-down collars, punk hair cuts, short back and sides, drainpipes, flares and turn-ups. However outrageous a style may once have been, it is now greeted with nothing more than a raised eyebrow or a nudge and a wink in most quarters, for while some standards have changed dramatically, others have changed little or not at all.

"If the secretary sticks to the basic colours she can't go wrong."

Stereotyped

Formal dress for men: black tie and tuxedo, or white tie and tails is still obligatory for many society events. And when one thinks of the businessman, one invariably draws a mental picture of a formal-looking, slightly older man wearing a suit, plain, usually white shirt, tie, dark shoes and perhaps carrying a briefcase. And while a civil servant is no longer expected to wear striped trousers, bowler hat and carry an umbrella, a secretary is still expected to project an aura of benign authority: to run the office; to be an efficient organiser and confidant; to make sure an important caller is not kept needlessly on hold; and to rebuff the nuisance-value tele-sales person firmly but politely.

Accessibility

According to Kate, a former secretary now in charge of her own office which she runs for a south London charity, a secretary should look accessible. For her, that means contemporary rather than Victorian dress, but no "loud" colours and no flashy jewellery. Ideally, she says, black and white or navy and white are to be preferred. If the secretary sticks to basic colours she can't go wrong. Blouses are preferable



Stylish – yes, but not how to dress for the office



to shirts, but a shirt and tie, perhaps a small bow, can look very smart. Many building society staff now wear uniforms: Abbey National, Nationwide-Anglia and Woolwich for example, and although these girls are issued with jackets, a navy or black skirt can be worn with an off-the-peg top to give a "sui-fied" look. That way it is possible to mix and match so as not to look the same all week. Jackets can be single or double breasted.

"A secretary should look accessible."

To set off a plain but smart outfit, a few basic accessories, a brooch, perhaps, and a small silk scarf are ideal. Ear-rings may be jewelled, but

should be small – subtlety is the key word. If trousers are worn, (and who says they shouldn't be?), tights don't really matter, but with a skirt or dress suit, plain and dark is best. Black court shoes are both inexpensive and very smart. High heels are not a good idea for the office, for practical reasons.

For warmth, especially in winter, woollens are a must. Again, bright colours are to be avoided, but a cardigan, button or zip-up, or a loose, thick sweater will match up well with a dark dress.

Material pleasure

Materials are equally important; acrylic is cheap and looks it, so for the PA this is definitely out. For blouses and shirts, cotton, polyester-cotton and nylon are the principal choices. Cotton is generally regarded as superior, but in

summer people who are prone to sweat profusely often find cotton shirts embarrassing, especially around the arms. Nylon is best in summer, white or cream blouses, and lots of them. A white brassiere is also obligatory for obvious reasons.

To set the outfit off, a small clutch bag or a briefcase-type bag, not necessarily in leather, provides a pleasant finishing touch.

An alternative scheme, possibly for the more senior PA, is a soft brown tweed or tweedy-type outfit. This tends to give a slightly schoolmarmish or matronly look. Matching tweed skirt and jacket can be set off with a primrose blouse, silk scarf and cameo brooch.

"Buy cheap, pay twice' is a maxim worth bearing in mind."

Kitting out

Most women enjoy shopping, especially for clothes. With the current trend towards high interest rates and inflation, one would expect clothes prices to rise exorbitantly. However, clothes prices have risen much more slowly than most others. Also the clothes shopper is spoilt for choice, so stiff competition helps keep prices down. This is likely to be the scenario for some time, so the clothes buyer who is prepared to shop around can fill her wardrobe with good quality clothes without going into the red.

Remember there is a world of difference between inexpensive and cheap. 'Buy cheap, pay twice' is a maxim worth bearing in mind. But remember also that there are such things as paying for the name and ostentation. Paying for the name means exactly that; an extremely expensive designer dress will generally be made of the same materials as those bought off the peg. Ostentation is paying extra for prestige. What man would take his fiancée to a cut price jeweller's to choose her engagement ring, and what girl would buy her mum a half-price necklace for her birthday? So where are the best places to shop?

Market vs store

The big stores: Marks & Spencer, Littlewoods or C & A are as good as any. You'll pay more in a boutique, less in a street market. Markets are not to be despised. The main reason markets are cheaper is because traders don't pay rates. Also, some clothes traders, especially in the capital, buy straight from the factory; others sell slight seconds at

	£
Blouse (nylon)	7.99
	8.99
Shirt (polyester/cotton or cotton)	9.99
Jumper (store)	9.99
Jumper (market)	4.99
Dress suit, navy (store) – (excellent buy)	18.99
Skirt (standard length – store)	11.99
Jacket (fully-lined, quality)	27.50
Gloves	from 1.99
Tights (4 pairs, black)	1.99
Tights (3 pairs, natural)	1.99
Black court shoes by Saxone	11.99
	19.99
	24.99
Lightweight, full-length coat	29.99
Black, real leather bag	9.99
	16.99
Umbrella	6.99

knock-down prices. If you live in or around London, the best market to buy clothes is undoubtedly the Sunday morning market at Petticoat Lane. There is a smaller market on the same site, Wentworth Street, that runs from Monday to Friday. Others include Leather Lane off Hatton Garden in the City, and The Cut (Lower Marsh) at Waterloo. These are "two-hour markets", ie they take place at lunchtime. South of the Thames there are markets at Brixton and Lewisham; north of the Thames, you could try Chapel Street (Islington) or Church Street (off Edgware Road). Avoid Kensington unless you have a bottomless purse. Walthamstow in east London has what is probably the longest market in the country, and many provincial towns also have excellent markets: Leeds, Sheffield and Salisbury to name but three.

"Never be afraid to shop around, provided you don't skimp on quality."

Some market traders sell shoes, but the best place to buy shoes is in a shoe shop where you'll get professional advice and individual attention. One final point about markets, they can be just as expensive as or even more expensive than shops, so always look around before purchasing.

When to buy can be just as important as where, if you're shopping on a fixed budget and not chasing the latest fashion. The January sales and end-of-season sales are good times. After Christmas until about March is what traders call the "kipper" season, when the business goes to sleep until the spring. Another trough is high summer when most people are taking their

holidays. Prices often fall at both these times.

Purse strings

How much should it cost to dress for the office? That depends on you, and to some extent on where you live, but clothes prices don't vary greatly from region to region. Some typical prices for various items are given (see box). Many of these prices are reduced; never be afraid to shop around, provided you don't skimp on quality.

In terms of optional extras: expect to pay two pounds upwards for a tie to wear with the shirt; don't pay less than about £3.99 for a wool scarf, and avoid acrylic. Silk scarf and jewellery are optional extras; for ear-rings, etc, expect to pay £1.99 up to whatever you can afford.

The following selection for a summer outfit (underwear excluded) should give you an idea of the sort of wardrobe you might require:

- 4 blouses
- 2 shirts
- 1 jumper
- 1 dress suit
- 1 skirt
- 1 jacket
- 7 prs tights
- 2 prs courts
- 1 leather bag

Total cost: approx £150

One last word, when you buy an umbrella, choose the most expensive one you can afford. Cheap umbrellas are usually seconds. Expect to pay an absolute minimum of £7 for a really good quality ladies' umbrella. Tote umbrellas can be more expensive but they come with a lifetime guarantee. Try also to affix your name, office address and phone number to your umbrella, especially if you use public transport.

Happy shopping!