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Opinion

The Law Firm's New Clothes

By CAMERON STRACHER MARCH 24, 2000

The proliferation of casual dress has reached its apotheosis with the decision of the white-shoe law firm Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft to go all casual, all the time. Cadwalader has even hooked up with Ralph Lauren and Esquire magazine to conduct a "casual wardrobe seminar" where fashion-challenged attorneys can get wardrobe tips.

But who really wants a casual lawyer? Though Cadwalader and other law firms that have made similar changes claim they are responding to the sartorial preferences of their dot-com clients and that the lawyers will still have to wear suits in court, has anyone asked the clients? Sure, the clients wear polo shirts and chinos (and worse), but that's why they're clients. They don't have to look good for their lawyers; they pay them. If lawyers were representing the circus, would they dress up as clowns? Would they dress up as murderers?

Clients don't want lawyers who look like them, just as homeowners wouldn't want to hire a plumber who dressed in his bathrobe. For \$350 an hour, clients want lawyers who look like, well, lawyers.

Casual dress does have obvious benefits for the lawyers. No more stockings, no more ties. Yet the regulations that define it can also be oppressive -- no jeans, no T-shirts, no sneakers, no shirts without buttons, no shirts without collars. And for

many, casualness may also require a whole new wardrobe (at least Ralph Lauren hopes so) and an excruciating dance before the mirror in the morning, when a lawyer used to be able to pull on a suit, white shirt and tie (or pearls), and be off.

What this shift really signifies is an acknowledgment that most lawyers have no reason to dress up in the first place. They are never in court; they rarely meet clients; they never leave their offices. Most lawyers at big firms could work in their pajamas; they spend the bulk of their time in the library, or in front of the computer with the door closed.

At least in suits they could pretend they were important. Now it's just a matter of time before they realize their newfound freedom has made them look like golf pros and clamor to be back in wingtips and pinstripes.

As lawyers shed their skins, more wardrobe changes may lie ahead. Cadwalader has urged its attorneys to donate their "gently worn" suits to groups like Dress for Success, which provides used business attire to lower-income people looking for jobs. Soon we may have another word for people struggling for a foothold: the suits.