



# Power suited

## The view at the top isn't all stark, structured blazers and skirts anymore

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SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

If there's no second chance to make a first impression, working women — who are judged by their appearance far more than their male counterparts — have about a nanosecond to project the idea "I'm in charge." For those at the executive level, polish should be seamless.

"Women want to stand out and fit in at the same time," says Anna Wildermuth, image consultant and president of Elmhurst-based Personal Images Inc. She works with individuals and corporations on appropriate dressing.

For those at the top of the heap, the aim is to command authority on sight without letting clothes steal the limelight. To illustrate executive outfitting, Wildermuth worked with Julie Puntch, 35, vice president in charge of developing and marketing brands for Roselle-based Roman Inc., a gift-item distributor. Puntch's work takes her quarterly to Asia for weeks at a time. It also involves meeting with major retail clients as well as small store owners. While fashion isn't her main concern, dressing well is critical.

"I want to make a good presentation both verbally and in my appearance," Puntch says.

At Puntch's level, Wildermuth advises building a core wardrobe that permits mixing and matching to extend the life of the items.

Versatility is important for the pocket-book if one follows Wildermuth's "investment dressing" philosophy — i.e., buying suits from \$300 to \$1,000 that will stand up to extensive travel and repeat cleanings. Wildermuth also exhorts the value of having clothes altered to improve the fit.

"Clothes don't have to be expensive," she says, "but a good fit says quality."

In creating a look, the consultant considers her client's body type and personal style, applying professional guidelines to them.

"All of us have a uniform," Wildermuth says, "a style and fit that is us. If you gravitate to that you will be a success."

Puntch agrees. "You feel better when you feel good about how you look."

### Rules to buy by

For executive wardrobing, image consultant Anna Wildermuth makes a few rules:

- Executive skirts should hover at the knee, give or take 2 inches, depending on the shape of your leg and your preference. "Anything above 2 inches [over the knee] is distracting," she says.
- Always shop with existing wardrobe items in mind to avoid items that hang untouched in the closet. "For each new item you buy, there should be three to four items in your closet that go with it. Otherwise buy them when you buy the new piece or don't buy it at all."
- Bold colors like red can be too strong while black too boring. Better options for the cold months include deep plum and hunter green, rich dark colors that are quietly reassuring.

### An executive session

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#### 1. The authority suit

In gabardine, this double-breasted suit is light enough to last three seasons. The jacket is nipped in rather than boxy for a feminine flare. For layering and texture, Wildermuth selected twin sets in plum and teal. The cardigans can be worn tied over the jacket like a scarf for an accent.

(Burberry jacket, \$440, and pants, \$245, from Saks Fifth Avenue)

#### 2. The at-ease suit

This ensemble earns respect while the taupe color relaxes the impact. It's ideal for Puntch, who is tall and wants a sharp look that won't intimidate some of her less formal clients. The neutral color also makes it a good mixer in the closet.

(Ellen Tracy jacket, \$445, and pants, \$245; shell from Dana Buchman sweater set, about \$236; all from Saks)

#### 3. Casually speaking

To fit in on casual day without losing professional points, Wildermuth suggests that Puntch wear slacks from one of the suits along with one of the sweater sets and the neckerchief. A knit collared shirt under a jacket also can dress down a suit.

The key is to keep the look, even if dressed down, businesslike. "Women do have a hill to climb still so it's all the more important to come off looking professional," Puntch says.

For figures that need more structured knits, it's worth investing in higher-end ones that won't lose their shape over time, Wildermuth says. "Affordable not only means money, it means time," she adds. "If it saves you time when you're searching in your closet, it might be worth it."

(Anne Klein plum sweater set, about \$162, and neckerchief, \$15, from Saks)

#### 4. Variations on the theme

Here's where ingenuity can come in—either in the kind of item worn under the jacket or the place where the professional finds it. Women can always be on the lookout for special pieces to coordinate with the core wardrobe.

In Puntch's case, a French blue shirt brightens either suit, and the Ralph Lauren Polo styling of this one lends it to casual wear too.



For evening, a slightly shimmery pewter blouse, straddling the work/play divide.

(Polo Sport shirt, found on sale for \$35 at the Kankakee Country Club; Emanuel pewter blouse, \$49, found at T.J. Maxx)

outer pockets are ideal for personal items. And the patterned texture is interesting but doesn't shout the way crocodile might.

(Bally bag, \$325, from Marshall Field's)

#### 5. Solid foundation

Wildermuth chose two pairs of shoes—a black leather and a brown fabric pair—for Puntch's wardrobe. Both have medium heel heights and moderate toe

shapes somewhere between rounded and square to avoid looking outdated quickly and for versatility with pants and skirts.

(Black Evan Piccone shoes, \$98, and brown Liz Claiborne shoes, \$79, from Marshall Field's)

#### 6. Baggage

The two-tone black and brown bag has a strap long enough to fit under Puntch's arm and roomy enough inside to accommodate file folders and memo pads. The

#### 7. Finishing touches

Double- or single-stranded black or natural pearls are the ideal, understated accessory. But at the executive level Wildermuth also recommends investing in one or two signature pins that help express individuality within the confines of the corporate look. Because Puntch is in a creative career Wildermuth chose an ornate pin for Puntch's lapel. She also recommends scarves that pull together the colors of the clothing and soften a suit. Belts in general should blend in. Hair accessories should be conservative in ornamentation, but should be worn if needed to keep the hair away from the face. Makeup should enhance, not dramatize.

(Carolee pearls, \$60, and earrings, \$40; and Patricia Locke pin, \$75; all from Marshall Field's)



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