

More

SEARCH

Wednesday September 2, 2009 6:25 PM ET



[HOME](#) [INVESTING](#) [SPENDING](#)

[PERSONAL FINANCE](#)

[TOOLS](#)

[PORTFOLIO](#)

[SELECT](#)

[SMALL BIZ](#)

[Login](#) | [Register](#) | [Help](#)



[College Planning](#) | [Debt](#) | [Elder Care](#) | [Employment](#) | [Estate Planning](#) | [Health Care](#) | [Insurance](#) | [Marriage & Divorce](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Retirement](#) | [Taxes](#)

SMARTMONEY MAGAZINE by Pilar Guzman (Author Archive)

Published March 12, 2002 | A A A

Working It

Goodbye shoulder pads, adios chinos. The [power suit](#) is dead, but you don't have to dress like the interns, either (or J.Lo, for that matter).

THE ROAD TO SUCCESS for professional women hasn't always been pretty — literally. Once upon a time, the gender-obliterating flannel skirt suit with the floppy bow tie was the only wardrobe option for working females, followed by the big-shouldered, Joan-Collins-as-CEO power suit. Then came the weeklong casual Friday, and women were once again left scrambling for their sartorial identity. "Women had worked so hard to move up the ranks," says Kim Johnson Gross, founder and co-author of the [Chic Simple](#) book series, "and all of a sudden they were looking like everyone else."

This spring, however, promises a friendly compromise. According to a panel of fashion experts — buyers, designers, stylists, fashion pundits and personal shoppers — 2002 is the year of relaxed luxury, with an emphasis on separates. "At some point there was a backlash against unwearable fur-trimmed suits and a [greater] interest in a looser, more individual style," says Robert Burke, Bergdorf Goodman's vice president of women's fashion merchandising. "You don't always have to wear a jacket anymore to be appropriate."

Meanwhile, a recession and generally troubled times have inspired a very pragmatic return to classics. According to New York-based fashion design consultant [Jeannine Umrigar](#), that means you'll see "a lot of neutral tones, after a few years of flamboyance and lots of bold color, which no longer feels right." Many shades of white, the uncolor that dominated the collections of every designer from [Helmut Lang](#) down to [J. Crew](#), is perhaps the most consistent trend of the season.

But such a low-key attitude doesn't mean sloppy, dowdy or even predictable. The options can be subtly quirky, from fitted, nautical-inspired pants to soft, gauzy skirts, or even the suede-rich prairie look seen in [Ralph Lauren's](#) spring show. In short, a less conventional — though not a less elegant — riff on the work uniform. Here's how to update yours:

Trousers

Good news. After several seasons of the ever-shrinking leg width and the shades-of-J.Lo bottom-baring rise, the wider and generally more flattering leg width is becoming the norm again. According to Umrigar, military touches — not of the multipocketed cargo ilk but a more tailored sailor-leg variety — are cropping up in the fabrics and in the simplicity of styling. And for the first time in ages, not everything is flat-front, a style that many women found a little too honest. Instead, what you'll see is a feminine take on the classic men's trousers — not too short in the rise but still resting on the hips a bit. Some good examples, available at department stores: Joseph (starting at \$150) and Theory (starting at \$175), made of stretch canvas, sateen or light-colored denim, and done in neutral colors such as khaki, ecru or espresso. On the more affordable end, J.Crew has mastered the perfect pant fit and often for only about \$75. The result you're looking for, says one editor: "slouchy, but well-tailored."

Tops

Although the \$99 cashmere sweater-set bonanzas at [Macy's](#) and [Bloomingdale's](#) are hard to resist, try. Cashmere priced that low tends to lose its shape quickly, and besides, "twin sets are on the decline," says Scott Formby, J.Crew's executive vice president of design and creative director. "We put out about half as many styles as we did even last year." In their place, you'll see sleeveless cowl necks or high, loose-necked tops with Dior-style bell sleeves. Since this look may have a short shelf life itself, it's a good time to stick with in-house labels (where quality cashmere will be in the \$150-to-\$200 range).

You'll also do fine to just sit out the sweater scene this year. "Because it was all about knits for a while, we're seeing the return of the crisp, classic white cotton shirt," says Judy Collinson, executive vice president of women's fashions at Barneys New York. While you won't go wrong with a simple white number from J.Crew or [Ann Taylor](#) under a suit, you can't beat the classic [Thomas Pink's](#) Pink Label white straight-collar shirt (\$115) with a pair of trousers. It has all the detailing of an Egyptian cotton Savile Row man's shirt but is nipped in all the right places for a woman's body. For a little more pizzazz, try traditional shirts with little flourishes — say, the military-style epaulet detail and pockets on Theory shirts (\$165), which, luckily, are made with such soft gauzy cottons that you won't look like Sgt. Pepper.

Skirts and Dresses

"Skirts aren't as strong as pants right now," says Collinson, and, indeed, designers seem to be treating the skirt as a novelty item rather than a staple this season. Although [minis](#) are back on the runway, the current rule on skirt length is either 1 to 2 inches above the knee or just below, so that you can see the space between the knee and the curve of the calf. As with trousers, designers are experimenting with buttons, oversize belt loops, double-sided sewn creases and sewn-in belts. Even the notoriously edgy Helmut Lang has flirty, layered skirts for spring (starting at \$310).



MARKETS	MY QUOTES	MOST ACTIVE	
Index	Price	Chg.	% Chg.
DJIA	9280.67	▼ -29.93	-0.32%
Nasdaq	1967.07	▼ -1.82	-0.09%
S&P 500	994.75	▼ -3.29	-0.33%
Russell 2000	555.83	▼ -2.23	-0.40%
10 Yr Bond	3.30	▼ -0.06	-1.79%
DJ Total Market Index	10221.43	▼ -34.38	-0.34%
S&P 400	636.71	▼ -3.39	-0.53%
Nasdaq 100	1594.28	▼ -1.56	-0.10%
DJ Transportation	3606.90	▼ -11.75	-0.32%

In This Story

- ▀Trousers
- ▀Tops
- ▀Skirts and Dresses
- ▀Suits
- ▀Jackets
- ▀Shoes
- ▀Handbags
- ▀What Women Want
- ▀Dressed for Battle

College Planning



7 Places Where College Grads Can Find Work

About to graduate with no job in sight? Send your resume to these places.

Presented by



Bernard Madoff: Top cop at the SEC?

Looking back on Bernard Madoff's crimes, the nation's courtrooms, newspapers, magazines, and blogs h...

[Read More](#)
[Why Charles Gibson's retirement boo...](#)
[Celebrate \(maybe\)! Fed says economy...](#)
[More on DailyFinance >>](#)

RELATED LINKS

Stock Quotes	Stock Charts	Stock Ticker
BloggingStocks	Market News	Walletop
Small Business	Investing	Luxist



Get the **FREE DailyFinance** iPhone application [Learn More](#)

powered by AOL Money & Finance

When it comes to dresses, our experts agreed, stick with classics that will make good long-haul investments. A **Kors** shirt dress in black silk for \$280 is about as simple as it gets. "I still think the Diane von Furstenberg wrap and cotton silk polo-neck dress is great with something over it during the day and into night," says Burke. Many fashion insiders also agree that the most vital and versatile dress in a woman's wardrobe is the simple shift dress, whether you spend \$495 on a **Piazza Sempione** or \$128 on a beige shift dress from **Nordstrom's Caslon line**.

Suits

Despite the overriding theme of separates in most spring collections, you still need at least one well-tailored suit in your repertoire — after all, uncertain times often call for a good interview outfit. This season the silhouette is a little narrower and shorter, and the shoulder is slightly softer. An excellent investment that will keep you in step for a few years: a classic but hip Helmut Lang trouser suit made of cotton twill stretch and light wool (starting at \$1,010), which comes with a few different pant options and tends to change only slightly from season to season. Pay a little more and you'll get what Los Angeles-based personal shopper Kendrick Osorio calls a best-kept suit secret and "a total coup": a **Vestimenta** suit (starting at \$1,200), made by the same people who make the high-end black-label **Armani**. "It's one of the best machine-made garments," Osorio says. "The quality is impeccable, and yet you aren't paying handmade-suit prices, which can be twice as much."

Another great deal: the house brands at department stores such as **Nordstrom** (Caslon) and Macy's (I.N.C.). While a Caslon suit at about \$280 might not have all of the subtlety in tailoring of, say, a Donna Karan (which easily tops \$1,500), comparably good fabrics and fashion-forward design make it a good deal for the price. The only thing you give up, experts say, is a little edginess, stylewise, and what one expert calls "couture's elusive perfect drape." But, says Siobhan Callaghan, vice president of merchandising at design houses **Philippe Adec** and Equipment, these lines "target a store's particular shopper in a way the designers can't."

Jackets

Since the trend is simplicity — slimmer but not too structured, more feminine without being frilly — this is a good time to buy stand-alone jackets that will endure beyond the season. Overall, jackets are a little shorter for spring and "not quite as defined or Edwardian in the puff sleeve, which had been a major theme for fall," says Umrigar. **Marc Jacobs's** jacket collection floored fashionistas at the spring shows — with slightly oversize buttons, Nehru collars and patch pockets — and there are already a crop of good variations. Designer Paul & Joe (available at stores such as **Barneys** and Bloomingdale's) is doing a nice military-style cotton jacket with epaulets on the shoulder, a band collar and external pockets (\$450).

The latest incarnation of the wear-everywhere blazer is going soft too. "The black leather jacket has been replaced by natural-colored suede this season, which can really change a business wardrobe," says Collinson. Her favorite: a timeless suede **Luciano Barbera** jacket (\$1,200 and up), which she says has excellent tailoring and fabrics, and is "perhaps the best investment piece for this season." If you don't need an investment that's quite so blue chip, expect to pay between \$300 and \$500 for the serviceable in-store lines.

Shoes

The economy may not have rocked fashion's hemlines, but it seems to have affected shoes. "You're not going to see a lot of high-heeled girly shoes, but many more four-season boots" — both tall and short, leather or suede — "as well as lower heels, more realistic kinds of shoes," says Burke. The trendiest entree: a continuation of the hippie-chic wedge heels with round toes, thicker sandal straps and a lot of shades of brown. But tread lightly. Our experts hint that outside the hard-core fashionista set, you might look a little too cutesy or '70s.

On the more classic side, **Ferragamo** has updated its look with a not-too-pointy, not-too-high sling-back (\$220), conservative enough for the office but racy enough for after-work drinks. Lower-heeled stilettoes or curved "kitten" heels, meanwhile, never go out of style. "**Stuart Weitzman's** stiletto is pretty damn close to a Manolo Blahnik," Burke says in reference to the \$150, well-made version of fashion's most coveted (and usually \$400-plus) shoe. And for those of us who equate "stiletto" with "masochist"? Dries Van Noten shoes are the best-kept comfort secret. A little more basic than his clothes, the shoes are almost ironically understated: relatively low, and with a toe that's not ridiculously pointy so your toes can actually breathe (starting at about \$250).

Handbags

"Ethnic is paramount this season," declares **Neiman Marcus** fashion spokesman Ken Downing, of this season's bags. Indian, Moroccan and Mexican touches — embossing, embroidery or beading — are popping up everywhere, but that rustic, poverty-chic style can look a little too wacky for the annual sales meeting. A good compromise: **Coach's** Legacy West Hobo bag in suede (\$198), which will easily pass in most work environments. And if you were the first on your block with a **Kate Spade** bag, this year check out clothing designer Sigerson Morrison's newly expanded and very original handbag line (prices start at \$244) before they start getting too expensive. With classic box-tote and bell-shaped silhouettes and schoolboy-style locks and hardware, they nicely straddle classic and novelty. As our experts agree, splurging a little on accessories goes a long way, especially in a down economy. Because in the end, says Callaghan, no matter how much you spend on a suit or a shirt, "it's the bags and shoes [that people look at first], and they always give you away."

What Women Want

Gentlemen, take note: Here's how to shop for the woman in your life without getting slugged for the results. If you're like most men, picking out clothing for women is easy: You don't do it. After all, if you buy something too small, she feels fat; if you buy something too big, she thinks you think she's fat. And besides, it's too easy to get distracted by the electronics department in the mall. But buying clothes for your wife or significant other can be done successfully, and it definitely has payoff potential. When you pick a winning addition to her wardrobe, "women feel as

if you've paid attention to the little things that mean so much more than the typical flowers or candy," says Dominique Isbecque, coordinator of the image consulting program at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. It also shows "that you're willing to take a risk. There's something very endearing about a man that's willing to do something he's not comfortable doing, like going into a lingerie shop." Here, some tips for going it alone.

There are safety nets.

Rule No. 1: You can't go wrong with cashmere. Sweaters are generally an easy fit, and buying the soft, expensive knit makes it seem like a splurge. In fact, any high-quality fabric, such as silk or fine Egyptian cotton, is generally a hit. "The finer the fabric, the more likely she's going to like it," says Isbecque. And believe it or not, lingerie is usually a winner too. Stick to pastels or black; camisoles and silk robes are always a safe bet as well.

Size is relative.

Unlike men's clothing, women's sizes are notoriously inconsistent. Your wife may wear an 8 in Gap jeans but a 12 in a Calvin Klein suit. To avoid the catch-22 fat discussion, notice not only what size she wears, but what size she wears on which labels. That's just one reason to stick to brands she already owns.

Consider her body type.

We don't have to tell you that the clingy red dress on the mannequin might look different on your wife. But determining what looks good on certain body types is often a more subtle distinction. If she has a short neck, stay away from turtlenecks and big collars. Women with fuller hips and thighs look best with below-the-knee A-line skirts (which gently flare toward the hem). If she has broad shoulders, stay away from wide "boat" necklines. Tall women can look too lanky in extremely short skirts, and "petite women in very long skirts look like they're in a Darth Vader outfit," says Atlanta-based image consultant Lisa Scherrer Dugan.

Think about what she already has.

Taking note of the little details is imperative. With pants, consider whether she tends toward flat or pleated fronts and a tapered or flared leg. For sweaters and other tops, notice whether her closet is filled with turtlenecks or plunging V-necks. And of course, think about color and patterns. If she wears mostly black, don't try to inject orange or large plaids into her wardrobe. "You've got to do your homework," says New York-based image consultant Lauren Solomon. "If you're going to guess, just go to Tiffany's and get her something in a blue box instead."

— Jena McGregor

Never miss another great SmartMoney Magazine article — subscribe today at up to 65% off.

RELATED STORIES

Stocks That Could Flourish as the Economy Struggles
Banks to Small Biz: "Borrowers Welcome"
Deducting Job Hunting Expenses

Follow SmartMoney on Facebook, Twitter & More:



Tip'd

Submit

Find More Articles About: [Personal Finance](#), [General](#), [Employment](#)

Comments | [Print This Article](#) | [Email](#) | [Trackback](#) | [Receive Email News Alerts](#) | [SHARE](#) | [RSS](#)

To license SmartMoney content and tools, click here



ORDER NOW

ANSWERING TOUGH QUESTIONS IN TOUGH TIMES.

SUBSCRIBE TO SMARTMONEY MAGAZINE TODAY >>



Advertisements

Go Acela - Book at Amtrak.com

Join TD AMERITRADE and trade free for 30 days + get \$100.

Free stock symbol lookup: Scottrade stock research

Switch to thinkorswim and get 3 mutual fund trades on the house.

Offer employees Aflac and improve your benefits package at no direct cost.

Ally Bank offers top rates and no sneaky disclaimers. FDIC insured.

Economy Survey Corp International Country Reports

CDs and High Yield Savings Accounts from American Express

Get a Free Blackberry Smartphone at E*TRADE Securities

Learn Currency Trading Online and How to Choose a Forex Broker

SmartMoney Magazine - A smart investment. Subscribe for only \$1 an issue.

Make the move to optionsXpress and get a free book. Learn More.

Sponsored Links

Top Penny Stocks To Buy

Penny Stocks Ready To Explode! Invest Now!
JustClickLocal.com

Do You Have Yellow Teeth?

Single mom discovers 1 simple trick to turn yellow teeth white from home.
News11daily.com

Bank of America Refinance

Take Advantage Of Low Refi Rates For Home Loans Up To \$3 Million.
www.bankofamerica.com

PennyStocks Soaring 600%

Sign up for FREE email alerts on stocks that jump 600% and more!
www.InsanePicks.com

WARNING: Smoking Kills!

However, These New Cigarettes Don't Kill. The Future Of Smoking Is Here!
News-11.Tv

Buy a link here

[SmartMoney Mobile](#) | [Customer Service](#) | [Magazine Customer Service](#) | [Subscribe to SmartMoney Magazine](#) | [Your Profile](#) | [Contact Us](#)

smSmallBiz™, SMARTMONEY®, layout and look and feel of SmartMoney.com and smSmallBiz.com are trademarks of SmartMoney, a joint venture between Dow Jones & Company, Inc. and Hearst SM Partnership. © 1995 - 2009 SmartMoney. All Rights Reserved. By accessing and using this page, you agree to our [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Use](#). All quotes delayed by 15 minutes. Delayed quotes provided by [Interactive Data Real-Time Services, Inc.](#) Historical prices and fundamental data provided by [Morningstar, Inc.](#) Mutual fund data provided by [Lipper](#). Mutual Fund NAVs are as of previous day's close. Earnings estimates provided by [Zacks Investment Research](#). Insider trading data provided by [Thomson Financial](#). Upgrades and downgrades provided by [Briefing.com](#).

You Are Viewing: SmartMoney.com — Investing, Saving and Personal Finance.

