

The Business Woman in the Model A Era

Anne Neely-Beck

MAFCA Era Fashion Committee

There were business women in the Model A era, but most women's magazines did not portray the women outside the house. During the 1920's, one in four women over the age of 16 were part of the work force. They mainly held jobs traditionally thought as female, such as in the fields of nursing and teaching. Thirty percent of women wage workers were involved in clerical and sale work. Clerical work or white collar positions were "respectable" during the era. White women born in the United States largely filled these positions.

During the 1930's, women workers faced heavy discrimination and social criticism. This was the Depression and it was thought that women were taking jobs away from men and that they were also abandoning their families in a time of extreme need. Most of the media railed against working mothers.

I did find some advertising by Pond's during the late 20's and early 30's that made reference to how a working woman could manage to maintain fresh beautiful skin even while working, if she used Pond's cold cream. It was "believed" that if women worked outside the home, they would lose their charm and delicate beauty.

The business women of the Model A Era, whether she was an executive or a secretary (clerical worker), could be smartly dressed. "The right clothes and smart clothes are part of the business of work, and in the day of excellent copies of originals, the secretary may be as well dressed as her employer." This is a quote from a business woman in the April 1930 issue of *Delineator* Magazine. Articles written in the February and October 1930 issues of *McCall's* talk about the importance of dressing correctly for the work place.

Suggestions were given by several business women on how to plan a wardrobe on a budget. One thought was to decide on a color and stick to it; then add one green, red, and black frock. With these three colors, add one good set of black accessories, bag, pumps, and a hat would complete the wardrobe and do the trick. Another suggestion was to add one piece of good jewelry if it fit into your budget. Also it was suggested to start with a black wool crepe coat with an uneven hem, then add a black skirt and several blouses. The blouses could be white and pastel for variety. If the budget permitted one or two frocks, a black and white print or perhaps a pink or yellow print on black background all with uneven hemlines. Also purchase a plain pair of black suede pumps, black gloves, black hat, and one or two pieces of black and white jewelry.


The *Delineator* article went on to say for the business woman who held an executive position which involved a good deal of social contact, a slightly more elaborate style wardrobe is inevitable. For example the foundation of the outfit might be a tweed costume with a flat jersey or lacy jersey blouse; perfect for so many purposes. Then besides the tweed, a formal wool suit, which would fit right in at a luncheon or a lecture. A one-color coat with harmonizing dresses, such as a black coat with a blue, red, or black dress and black and white accessories would give plenty variation.

The article concludes "Careful planning, better and fewer frocks, colors carefully chosen, interchangeable accessories, common sense, good taste-isn't this a fitting dress platform for a well dressed business women everywhere?" Still quite true today, 77 years after the *Delineator* article was published.

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Business today is demanding and getting the best there is. Dress, behavior, speech are all important

IN THE RÔLE OF A BUSINESS GIRL

By FRANCES BUENTE

BY WHAT magic formula for success, people ask, does a business woman lift herself out of the traditional position as the subordinate and helper of men and assume for herself the supposedly masculine place as head?

Any woman who has become a successful executive knows that there is no magic about her upward climb. She will tell you that she did not start out on her career with Success for her goal. Success is a *reward*—not an aim. You can begin to have it from the very hour you go to work and you can keep on having it in bigger and better ways each day, every day, as the natural and inevitable result of conscientious and intelligent work.

When I started work as a junior just out of school, I had no other vision of success than a humble desire to make myself useful to the person employing me. For a young person just starting out in business, this is a very good aim indeed, and one which is almost certain to be crowned with this day-by-day success.

If you are really in earnest about your job, you will soon find many ways of making yourself useful outside the mere daily routine. An alert young person will at once begin to feel an active interest in, and curiosity about, the matters which are passing through her hands. She will ask questions, look things up, read everything about the business she can lay her hands on—not from a mere slavish conviction that it is the thing she ought to do, but because she wants to know for *her own satisfaction*—it makes her work so much more interesting.

Perhaps it is partly because this interest in and curiosity about impersonal things is more general among boys than girls that young men still so often shoot ahead of young women in our offices.

No matter how earnest, hard-working, and conscientious a girl may be, unless there is something within her which makes her reach out for and grasp with her mind all there is to know about her job, she will never graduate out of the ranks of the

subordinates. On the other hand, if she does show a broad understanding of the problems of the business in which she is working, her employers will be only too glad to place more and more responsibility upon her and more and more important work in her hands.

Earnestness, conscientiousness, the capacity for careful attention to detail, patience, and all the other virtues of the routine worker, are highly esteemed in business and reap their own special kind of success. But, alone, they are not the qualities that fit a woman for an important executive position.

To climb to a really high place a woman must have, in addition to a special ability for her particular job, something of that passion for “the game” that so many men have—a spontaneous, consuming interest that drives her on in spite of herself, that renders her oblivious to fatigue, hours, and ordinary concerns; and makes the rewards—this elusive and imperfectly visioned “success” which so many people are blindly seeking—of secondary importance.

Before applying for her first job, a girl should try to find out, as far as possible, for what she is best equipped. This will be determined to a very great extent by what she likes to do, but not altogether. It is not easy in the early, unformed years—not even with the new vocational guidance—for a girl to make an analysis of herself that will prove completely right in later years. But in so far as you can form an estimate of your own abilities—your own preferences as to what you want to do with your life—you should follow that in the choice of a job you go after. Just because your friends are happy in a certain kind of work is no proof that you will be, too.


The principal objection to women in business has always been that they are too “personal.” There is some truth in this. That a woman should learn to keep her business and personal concerns separate is one of the most important rules for success.

Bring to your job something of the art of the actress. Study your rôle. If, on the stage, you were

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“Success is a reward,” says Frances Buente. “You can begin to have it from the very hour you go to work and you can keep on having it in bigger and better ways each day, every day.”

A few years ago Miss Buente started at the bottom of the ladder in an office in New York; today she heads her own successful business. Her advice is founded, therefore, on practical experience and will be of interest to all girls.



Like an actress, study your part

This article, *In The Role Of A Business Girl*, appeared in the February 1930 issue of *McCall's Magazine*. Note that the author, a successful business women herself, stated that dress, behavior, and speech are all important for the role of a business girl. She suggests like an actress, study your part.

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DELINEATOR

Plouffe, N.Y. 30.

WHAT SHOULD THE BUSINESS WOMAN WEAR ?

Lucile Babcock Interviews Three of New York's Most Important Women Executives

NOT so long ago a woman who comes in contact with a large group of business women said to me: "We all enjoyed so much Delineator's article on 'What the College Girl Should Wear' that I wish you'd do something for the business woman. I know that many of the girls I meet are not as appropriately or smartly dressed as they might be if they gave the subject the study it deserves."

Now, the term "business woman" covers so many phases of activity that for a moment the request was staggering. Obviously it was impossible to give blanket suggestions which would cover the type of thing a woman concerned with the business of selling real estate or coats in a ready-to-wear department of a great store, or acting as a social secretary, might wear. But an attitude towards clothes, a working basic plan for any wardrobe in any season, a clear definition of what clothes skillfully chosen and beautifully worn may do, that I determine to present.

I turned for my information to the different types of New York's women executives, each a leader in her field, each working daily with a widely varied group of business women.

First I called on Mrs. Stanley Resor, whose name is a synonym for success in national advertising. She greeted me in the very smart office of the great advertising agency where she is a chief executive, and while I was saying "How do you do" I was mentally cataloging her as we fashion people do.

"Henna flat crêpe . . . a Vionnet model . . . gorgeous color for her brown eyes and chestnut hair . . . simply heavenly lines . . . the topaz beads are a nice accent" . . . and then, having a perfect example before me of the beautifully costumed very feminine type of business woman, I put my question.

"I believe with all my heart that it is essential," said Mrs. Resor, "for the business woman to be of the mode and as feminine as possible without in any way trading on sex. I am glad that the old belief that the business woman should frown on frills and present her case (Turn to page 45)



In this modern business office, Miss Dorothy Shaver, a brilliant type of the modern business executive, directs a Bureau of Fashion and Decoration



Miss Dorothy Shaver drives in from the country to the store in a gray and white tweed frock with black accessories



What Should The Business Woman Wear? appeared in the April 1930 issue of *Delineator Magazine*. The author interviewed three business women to find out how they planned their working wardrobe.

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He knows he could trust her to sign important letters when he had to catch a train

HOW TO KEEP A JOB

By Owen Ford

NO ONE can honestly say to you: "Do so-and-so, and thus-and-thus, and you'll never be fired." Business isn't as simple and certain as that. But there are definite qualities which have proved to be business assets . . . qualities which any of us can acquire and which will help us to keep any job that we really want to keep.

If we tried to find one word to sum up these qualities, we'd probably hit on "personality." Some people make the mistake of thinking that personality is concerned only with surface things such as the right sort of clothes and complexion and smile. But don't you think it goes deeper than that? Don't you think it's really an expression of the stuff we're made of—our character? Loyalty, courage, honesty, patience . . . these may sound like old-fashioned virtues, but they're just as important today as they were way back in the beginning.

Developing your personality means growing more skillful in the art of getting along with people. This isn't so easy in business, because you don't choose your office associates as you do your friends. To make yourself popular with them, you must be tactful and considerate and tolerant—and make up your mind firmly that you'll be above those petty jealousies which so often lead to needless bickering.

Getting along with your boss is largely a matter of making yourself really useful to him. That doesn't mean just being on hand to answer his telephone and type his letters; it means having a genuine interest in helping him make a success of his job. He has a right to expect this, your time in the office and your loyalty belong to him.

Does this sound as if he were getting the best of the bargain? Fortunately, that isn't so, for the more you help him, the more you'll help yourself. While you're learning all the ins and outs of his work, you're preparing yourself for a better job. While you're finding new ways to make yourself indispensable to him, you're developing a richness of character that will stand you in good stead all your life.

TEN "BE'S" FOR BUSINESS GIRLS

Be—

- RELIABLE
- INDIFFERENT
- LOYAL
- DISCREET
- ORGANIZED
- TACTFUL
- FASTIDIOUS
- TOLERANT
- ENTHUSIASTIC
- COURTEOUS

It's easy to spot a girl who's headed for success . . . There was Mary, for instance. She started as a clerk—going and inexperienced, but blessed with an eager sense of curiosity. It didn't take her long to master the details of her job; and then, instead of being satisfied with herself for doing all that she was paid to do, she looked around for more work to conquer. She soon realized that she'd got ahead faster if she knew stenography, so she went to night school; and before she had finished her course, she was taking occasional letters when the others were busy.

She made fewer mistakes than most beginners, because she knew what the letters were about. The man she was working for liked to dictate to her; she was always cheerful and enthusiastic and if she was overworked, and often had to stay overtime, no one heard about it from her. One of the men was promoted last spring and he took Mary up with him as his private secretary. He knew he could depend on her loyalty and her intelligence. He knew that if he had to catch a train at five-thirty, he could leave important letters for her to sign and be perfectly sure that she wouldn't make any stupid mistakes in them.

Mary is still young, but she's making more money than her handsome brother Bill, who is always changing jobs because the firm doesn't appreciate him. Mary isn't a beauty, but she keeps herself immaculately groomed, and she has a friendly smile and eyes that look interested when you talk to her. Everyone likes her and if they had a personality contest in her office, I'm quite sure she'd win it.

Girls who are more interested in themselves than they are in their jobs will never get very far in business. The competition is too keen. While they quit work at four forty-five to study the color of their new nail polish, some more ambitious girl will be staying late to study the job ahead. And that reminds me of one final word of advice: spend all the time you can learning the job ahead of you, but never neglect your own job to do it.



The five-dollar girl can see as far as the tip of her tiny nails

How To Keep A Job appeared in the October 1930 issue of *McCall's Magazine*. The author suggested that if you are well groomed, have a friendly smile, and eyes that look interested when you talk, then you will go far in the business world. Note the Ten "Be's" for business girls.

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This is my version of the picture in the October 1930 *McCall's* article, *How To Keep A Job*. This is my circa 1930 typewriter. I am sitting at it with my hair finger waved, wearing a 1930 reproduction dress suitable for one to wear to the office and my ever so classic pearls.

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This is my version of the April 1930 article in *Delineator*, *What Should The Business Woman Wear?* I am pictured in front of our 1930 Standard Coupe, which is parked in front of a historical building we own, circa 1920. I have on a reproduction black and white crepe de chine dress, black strapped shoes, black turban, black purse, white gloves, and my ever so classic pearls.

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