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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 183: LUCY VOZZA – THE CHANGING BUSINESS DRESS CODE

Female Speaker

From William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business, produced by the William & Mary School of Business and its MBA program. Offered in four formats the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. For more information, visit wm.edu.

Ken White

Welcome to Leadership & Business, the podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. Sharing strategies, information, and insight to help you become a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. In 1975, John T. Malloy wrote *Dress for Success*. A couple of years later, he followed it with *Dress for Success for Women*. As a result, a generation of professionals had guidelines and rules to follow when it came to the business dress code. In 2022, that code is changing like never before. In fact, there is no dress code today. Professionals have the opportunity to define new ways to dress comfortably while projecting an image of professionalism. Lucy Vozza believes clothing and the vibe you send to others are linked. After spending 17 years in sales with biotech companies such as Baxter, Regeneron, and Genentech, she recently transitioned to a leadership role at BeiGene. She joins us to discuss today's evolving dress code and what you should consider when getting dressed for work. Here's our conversation with Lucy Vozza.

Ken White

Lucy, thanks for being here. I appreciate your time. This is a big weekend for you as we're recording because tomorrow you'll be receiving your diploma, your executive MBA diploma. So, big weekend. Congratulations.

Lucy Vozza

Thank you. It's very exciting. I can't believe the day has finally arrived.

Ken White

It was a breeze, right?

Lucy Vozza

Sure, no problem. Eighteen months of low stress.

Ken White

It sure was. Yeah. Well, before joining the executive MBA program, you've had a fantastic career in pharmaceutical biotech area. And one of the things right before we were recording you and I were talking about is when I first met you, I thought of an old phrase my mother used to say, and that is she is put together. Right. And so I knew immediately that your appearance for you is important in that personal brand. That's one of the reasons we wanted to have you on the podcast today. When you first started in your profession, what was it? Was there a uniform? Was there a code? How did people dress then?

Lucy Vozza

Yeah, so around 17 years ago, when I started in pharmaceutical sales, you could spot a drug rep a mile away. Everybody had their black suit on, blue shirt, skirt or pants. And it was a requirement that you dressed like that from the very beginning. You're calling on healthcare professionals who have very little time, and in sales, you're bidding for people's time. So if you need to take some time in the way you present yourself so that somebody will give you a little bit of their time, it's very important.

Ken White

And, of course, that has changed dramatically now. So what are you seeing now when you see the reps in terms of what they're wearing?

Lucy Vozza

Right. Also, it's geographically dependent as well. I think people have learned to sort of meet your audience where you are. So, for example, if I was calling on a rural area in Southwest Virginia, I wasn't going to wear a three-piece suit and a luxury handbag. It did not come off as well and didn't show a lot of empathy. Right. Now, if I was in Washington DC, and I knew that there was a doctor who was impressed by fancy restaurants, then, yeah, 100%, I would carry in a Louis Vuitton bag, and he was impressed by that. So it's a lot of knowing your audience that makes a big difference.

Ken White

Why is that important?

Lucy Vozza

Because they know that you understand where they're coming from. Right. Like, people have different situations, and they have different problems. If I go into a rural hospital

clicking in and some Christian Dior heels, they're going to say, this woman has no idea what our issues are. How could she possibly understand us or even help us? I just don't have time to talk to her. Right, so it matters.

Ken White

When you think of wardrobe, is it personal brand? Is it professionalism? What is it? What category does that fall under?

Lucy Vozza

Well, it's a little bit of everything. So, for example, I think a lot of the way that the wardrobe has changed, when we want to talk about it, you can inject a little bit of your personality into it but still remain professional. For example, when I would come to class, I always wanted to look put together, as you say, thank you. But it would be a Saturday, so I would wear like a really cool Rock band T-shirt, like a Kiss T-shirt with a nice blazer over it and nice jeans. No holes, please, and some heels. Right. So you can inject a little bit of personality for my own brand, but I still considered it professional.

Ken White

Right.

Lucy Vozza

So it's both.

Ken White

Which means people have choice today.

Lucy Vozza

Yes.

Ken White

Are you seeing people do a pretty good job with that choice?

Lucy Vozza

Making the wrong choices?

Ken White

Yeah.

Lucy Vozza

Yes.

Ken White

Yeah.

Lucy Vozza

Yes, there are choices. It doesn't mean that I agree with them, especially people in senior leadership. They have an image to uphold and, with that image, defines their responsibilities. And if you're going to roll out of bed or wear the T-shirt that you just worked out in, it does not impress me the least bit. I think that you need to take some effort and time if you're going to be speaking from the stage, the Zoom stage, whatever it might be, so people take you seriously.

Ken White

So you mentioned Zoom. We're all spending so much time on there or in some sort of video platform post-pandemic. What advice do you have to that professional who's not quite sure what to wear when they have a Zoom meeting that particular day?

Lucy Vozza

You know, whatever pants you want or sweat pants or yoga pants, whatever floats your boat. But the top half of you is in an office, right? So pretend you're at an office. So put your hair together, put your makeup on, put on some earrings, and be your best self. That is the way that I tell people you need to show up, like, you are going to an office that is your office.

Ken White

Yeah. A lot of our younger students ask about what to wear. What advice would you have for young women entering may be their first job as a profession?

Lucy Vozza

Okay, well, you don't have to spend a million dollars to look good.

Ken White

Great.

Lucy Vozza

So there are various companies that have different price points. So invest in a couple of staple pieces like a nice black blazer, a nice handbag. Again, it doesn't have to be like a \$3,000 handbag. Anything that you can mix and match and put together and walk out the

door because we're busy. Especially as you get older, as you transition into motherhood and working full time, you just want to get out as seamless as possible. So just have those couple of staple items, and you're good to go.

Ken White

How about men? What have you seen? Because and the reason I ask, I'm hearing from some people that women seem to be paying a little more attention to their wardrobe versus some men today.

Lucy Vozza

Yeah. I don't know why men think it's okay to go to work like they're at the gym. I really don't understand it. I would just say it doesn't take too much effort to throw on a button-up shirt and maybe some chinos. And, you know, right now, fashion sneakers are a big deal.

Ken White

Yeah.

Lucy Vozza

Right. Luxury brand fashion sneakers, like eight nine hundred dollar sneakers. Do I think that's okay? It depends on the situation. Again, I'm not going to wear those in rural West Virginia, but if I'm going to an office meeting, which is very West Coast, that's okay. Throw on a blazer. You're good to go.

Ken White

The sneakers is very interesting because I just had a conversation with some younger students earlier about that, asking, may I wear a suit with the sneakers? That seems to be gaining a lot of traction.

Lucy Vozza

Yeah. And the other thing that's changing, too, is the watch, right? Like, you have your Rolex and as status symbol. And now, with the millennials and the other generation that I don't even know, we're moving more towards smartwatches.

Ken White

Yes.

Lucy Vozza

Right. Especially when you're in biotech, and you're asking for money for startups, like, you're not going to walk in with a Rolex. Again, know your audience.

Ken White

Yeah.

Lucy Vozza

Right.

Ken White

Very interesting.

Ken White

We'll continue our conversation with Lucy Vozza in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. If your business or organization is interested in retaining your best people, consider enrolling them in one of our MBA programs for working professionals. William & Mary's online MBA, part-time MBA, and executive MBA programs are designed for the professional who works full time, so both the employee and the organization benefit. Show your employees you care by investing in their growth. Check out the MBA program at William & Mary at wm.edu. Now back to our conversation with Lucy Vozza.

Ken White

There's been some recent pieces written Wall Street Journal, Harvard Business Review about this is an interesting time because there are no rules now. We get to kind of recreate business attire. With that said, what are your reactions to that?

Lucy Vozza

I'm not a fan. I will say we had an off-site meeting. And you know what's tricky is business casual. Nobody really knows what that means. Everybody interprets everything different. And to some women, business casual was wearing your yoga pants and sandals into a meeting. That's not okay. I don't feel like that is an appropriate look for a business meeting. You've got to look back at the classics and stick to them a little bit. Do you know what I mean? Like, certain things that are not okay are bare shoulders with spaghetti straps for women. It's a distraction, really. And not to sound sexist, but as a female, we have more opportunity to wear distracting clothes or hair different ways, and makeup and accessories. And to be taken seriously, you need to be dressed seriously. It doesn't mean that your personality can't shine through, but just be very mindful that people might interpret things very differently.

Ken White

What's the role of the leader in terms of setting a dress code, giving people some guidelines?

Lucy Vozza

Well, that's an excellent question because the question really should be, should they have a role? Because it seems like they really don't is what I'm seeing, especially through the pandemic and through Zoom. And when we go to meetings in person, everybody is still just very relaxed. But I will say it's a very interesting time. We did a lot of D&I work here, and it does seem that women and people of color will put in a little more effort into the way they dress so that they are taken more seriously or maybe on the other side. It's not really that important. It's been really interesting to see that.

Ken White

I think you definitely see in here, especially with our younger students. Some of them grew up in a household where clothing was important. It was talked about, and others didn't. And if you grew up in one that didn't. Boy, it's a tough time.

Lucy Vozza

It's a very tough time.

Ken White

Yeah.

Lucy Vozza

It is.

Ken White

What about cost? We're hearing from that. I'll talk to some younger professionals. Wow, it's dry cleaning. It's a lot of money. I can't do this. I'd rather keep it low-key.

Lucy Vozza

Well, there's just so many options, really. When I first started. My go-to was Banana Republic. It's a good starting point. Those suits last a lifetime. I probably still have some pants. They last you, like, ten years. You get two of those. You only take them to the dry cleaners, like, once a month. That's okay. That's totally doable. And you can get a couple of classic shirts and then throw in some different earrings. It's okay. It's totally doable. And slowly, you build up your wardrobe to where you get to your Christian Louis Vuitton shoes and your Christian Diors if you like that sort of thing.

Ken White

Where does psychology come into play?

Lucy Vozza

It's a big part of it, honestly. I think, especially in sales, a lot of it is confidence. And you walking in to talk to a C suite in a frumpy shirt is not going to give you a lot of confidence. Again, you need to meet your customer where they are. So if I'm going to talk to a CEO, I also want to look like a CEO. If I'm going to go talk to minimum wage paid medical assistant, I'm going to change my wardrobe. And all of that has to do with confidence. You have to be comfortable wearing an outfit that is going to put you at the same point as a CEO. And you also have to be comfortable in knowing, like, that is not appropriate in this situation.

Ken White

Right. A million years ago, before I got into higher education, I worked in local television, and one night, the air conditioning in the studio died on us, and it was incredibly hot. And so one of the other anchors said, I'm going to wear shorts. I'm going to wear my jacket and tie, and so forth. And I did the same and had the worst five minutes in broadcast history. Everything went wrong, and it was that psychological piece of it. I didn't have my quote-unquote uniform on right. Even though no one knew that. Somehow I knew it.

Lucy Vozza

Yeah. No, it's so true. I will walk into meetings, and it just sounds silly, but if I don't have, like, five-inch heels, it makes me feel taller. I'm not a very tall person. I have a loud voice, but it just makes me feel taller and I feel more confident. It's silly, but that's just how I am.

Ken White

For those who aren't really into clothing and don't give it a whole lot of thought but would like to. Where can they go?

Lucy Vozza

Oh, my gosh, there's so many things right now, especially with social media, Instagram, and my little secret is I actually work with a stylist. His name is Jeff Banks. He's amazing. But anything on Instagram, first of all, that's free advice, really, and the way that you can just shop and pick from there. And some of these sites will offer you the same outfit with three different price points, so that's really easy. There's just no shortage of information on where to find that stuff.

Ken White

For young men will often see some fashion mistakes that they just don't know. They're getting their first suit. They're getting their first jacket. And so sometimes when you buy a sport coat, the venting is sewn shut. Sometimes they don't know that's supposed to come off, or the label is on the sleeve. They don't know that that's supposed to come off.

Lucy Vozza

Or they're too big.

Ken White

They just don't know. What are some of those common mistakes that a young professional woman might come across as she's learning how to dress?

Lucy Vozza

I think sometimes what I've seen is women will buy these heels that have, like, a front platform, and it just looks like it's made for another type of industry. Maybe their clothing might be a bit too tight, or it might just be too comfortable. I'm a big fan of, like, a well-tailored suit and not a sweater that you throw over. That's what you wear when you're sitting on the couch. So just try to get something that's a little tailored. One piece that's tailored is good that you can mix and match. That's what I would say.

Ken White

What do you predict moving forward? Because what we're reading a great piece in Wall Street Journal, another great piece in Harvard Business Review talking about this and both saying, this is a time where there's no rules. We get to create the rules. So where are we going? What do you think we'll see in the next few years?

Lucy Vozza

I think it's going all over. I don't think we're going to go back to a three-piece suit for sure. I mean, you see these young millennials that are working in Silicon Valley. They're very intelligent. They know what they're doing, and they don't feel that they need to change the way they're doing things right, especially when it comes to clothing. I think their interests lie elsewhere. I think you'll see a little bit of both, though. I don't think you'll see a return of that tailored suit look that I like. I think young people these days are interested in other things like causes and getting enough work-life balance.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Lucy Vozza. And that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business, home of the MBA program, offered in four formats the full-time, the part-time, the online, and

the executive MBA. If you're looking for a truly transformational experience, check out the William & Mary MBA program at wm.edu. Thanks to our guest, Lucy Vozza. And thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White, wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.

Female Speaker

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