

TWENTYSOMETHINGS

Gen Y money: Five tips for buying job hunting attire on a budget

Victoria Hoffman

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Welcome to our Gen Y money blog, where a recent grad chronicles her real-life journey to becoming a financially independent adult.

One of the best interview tips I've heard is that your potential employer might not remember if you look good, but they *will* remember if you *don't* look good.

Investing in proper interview attire might seem like a financial impossibility for a twenty-something-year-old recent graduate, but it's one of the [implicit costs of job hunting](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-investor/personal-finance/household-finance/gen-y-money-job-hunting-is-that-much-harder-when-youre-broke/article20199828/) [http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-investor/personal-finance/household-finance/gen-y-money-job-hunting-is-that-much-harder-when-youre-broke/article20199828/]. And like all reasonable and foreseeable expenses, it needs to be budgeted for accordingly.

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As I mentioned above, looking professional isn't just a sign of respect – it can give you a competitive edge by allowing your interviewer to actually picture you in the position. It also sends the message that you actually want the job.

I can speak from experience when I say that I welcomed any sort of edge in my job hunt, especially when my resume lacked work experience and LinkedIn told me that I was one of 297 applicants for a position.

Even when a hiring manager told me to “dress casually” or that our conversation would be “informal,” I never wore my favourite pair of jeans. Though it may have deterred me from showing up in a full power suit, I still made an effort to look like a great candidate, and looking like a great candidate required a bit of spending.

In my final semester of university, I realized that I would soon be heading down the interview highway and that none of my student-era clothes would do. So with a little help from my mom, I invested in a classic blazer and pencil skirt. Collectively, these items added up to around \$200, but they're classic pieces that are still in good shape.

I went the “disposable clothing” route with shoes, shirts and tights, spending an additional \$100 to get me through my first “interview season.” A couple of other things I relied on are an iron, a steamer and a stain-removing pen.

Unfortunately, as I noted in [my last post](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-investor/personal-finance/household-finance/gen-y-money-the-wasted-cost-of-disposable-clothing/article22889069/) [http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-investor/personal-finance/household-finance/gen-y-money-the-wasted-cost-of-disposable-clothing/article22889069/], I also made a series of regrettable clothing purchases along the way, basically wasting money on cheap throwaway clothing. That got me thinking about how I could have stretched my dollars further while maintaining a professional appearance during my job hunt. What should be considered when setting a budget for interview attire?

“First, make the budget reasonable to begin with,” says Rona Birenbaum, a financial planner with Caring for Clients in Toronto. “Thinking that you can look pulled together for \$50 would be a bit of a stretch. There are ways to make a dollar go further though.”

Ms. Birenbaum had these tips for buying a professional wardrobe when your bank account is running on empty:

- **Invest in classics** – Shell out the dollars for wardrobe staples like nice dress pants and simple blazers. As Ms. Birenbaum notes, “Spending money (even modest amounts) on pieces that are ‘hot today’ and ‘not tomorrow’ becomes a vicious cycle.” Update your classics from season to season (or from first interview to second interview) by borrowing accessories from friends, or purchasing a couple of tops from “fast fashion” stores.
- **Save with quality** - Stretching your dollar doesn't always mean getting more for your money. My job hunt was a long, stressful process and I needed clothing items that would go the distance. Choosing a higher-quality sweater for \$75 over two cheap \$30 sweaters will most likely be a smarter spending decision.
- **Consider consignment** - Many gently used designer pieces are available at consignment stores for a fraction of the retail price. Sifting through pre-loved items can take a bit of extra effort, but will pay off if you happen to find a killer deal.
- **Tailor for the perfect fit** – If you find a consignment deal or sale rack item that doesn't quite fit, consider having it altered. As Ms. Birenbaum notes, it's worth it to spend money to have items tailored for the perfect fit, especially if you didn't pay full price in the first place.

- **Take proper care** – I'm guilty of throwing my work clothes in a heap after a long day at the office and ignoring special washing instructions. Taking good care of your clothes will help extend the life of your wardrobe and save money in the long run. As for dry cleaning? "It's a killer financially," says Ms. Birenbaum. "Always check the label before you buy an item. You'd be surprised at how many items can be hand washed and laid flat." She also recommends staying away from silk, cashmere or wool if proper care can't be maintained.

Spending smart to look smart is possible, it just takes a bit of planning. As someone who has been through the post-university job hunt, I understand that the last thing you want to spend big money on is work clothing. However, looking back I can also say that it boosted my confidence, eased my stress and ultimately made me feel like a better candidate when I looked the part.

Top off your interview look with a smile and a firm handshake – they're free.

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