Personal Branding and Creating a Professional Image:

Match your shoes to your hem-line, always wear panty-hose, if you wear a little make-up it gives the impression that you pay attention to details. As a feminist, much of this seems offensive; however, working in a profession where I advise young people on how to present themselves in a professional manor, I know that these things are important.

It is not that how you look is more important than what you think and do, of course not. BUT, if what you wear draws too much attention, then others will be more focussed on the fact that you are not dressed appropriately and less focussed on what you have to say. Thus, spending some time thinking about what you are going to wear and what is appropriate is a way of ensuring that the emphasis is on you as a professional and not on your appearance. Furthermore, how you dress is not only about you. In fact, it says more about what you think of others. If you dress professionally it says "I respect you and this company." How you dress is a part of your personal brand, but it also contributes to your company's image. You are an important part of the corporate brand.

If you still think that these things are merely superficial and really do not matter, then why did the discussion of interns at an on-site visit with a large employer result in a 30 minute conversation about professional dress and how to ensure that students understand the message they are sending. The students thought that because they were not meeting directly with clients and because there were other long-time employees that dressed casually, that it was alright to show up in jeans. How many times has your mother asked you "if others were jumping off a bridge would you do it too?" Just because others do it, does not mean it is a good idea. Perhaps the reason why they have been in the same department for 30 years is a pretty good indication of how that un-professional image is working out for them.

You want your clothes to match your goals. If you want to be taken seriously, to be thought of as an intelligent professional with leadership potential then how should you dress? Regardless of whether you are in a role that meets directly with clients, you want to present yourself well. After-all, your colleagues, your boss and your boss’s boss will see you on a daily basis.

A common error, for young people especially, is that they miss-interpret what business casual means. The word casual has them heading in the entirely wrong direction. In fact, business casual is likely a lot more formal than you think. See below for some examples of business casual:
Business Casual No-no’s

T-shirts and jeans worn together
Dirty sneakers
Flip Flops
Shirt tail out
Active Wear
Leggings or stirrups
No hosiery or socks

Image Breakers for Women:

Short Skirts
Tight fitting clothes
Exposure of body piercings
Too much cleavage
Over use of make-up
Heavy perfumes or lotions
Bows, excessive florals in garments

Image Breakers for Men:

Heavy Colognes
Overstuffed pant pockets
Scuffed shoes
Un-tidy facial hair
Dirty fingernails
Out dated eyewear

For more tips on how to dress professionally visit: http://www.cpcc.edu/cpcc/learningcollege/core-competencies/dress-for-success-files/barnes_dress_4_handout.pdf

Studies show that most people will make decisions about who you are within the first 30 seconds of meeting you and some of those impressions can be difficult to alter once formed. This is one of the reasons why I emphasize the importance of dressing professionally particularly when you are going to a networking event or interview. What you wear will certainly have an impact on what impression people form of you. Your physical appearance provides people with many clues to your personality and traits.

But personal branding is not just about having the right staples in your wardrobe and knowing when to wear pin stripes or a red blazer; it is about understanding yourself, your strengths, your passions, and what makes you unique. When we look at corporate brands we see that they focus on their greatest quality and go with that. They do not dilute their message by trying to be everything to everyone. That is just not possible. The same thing applies when you are determining your personal brand. As branding guru William Arruda explains, we need to be authentic about our brand. Are you a Volvo, a Mercedes, a Mazda? All of these are valuable for different reasons and will appeal to different people. Your personal brand needs to highlight what makes you exceptional “a unique promise of value.”

Finding a way to be authentic about who you are and what you can contribute is not only going to help you with building a strong personal brand, but it will go a long way in ensuring that you find a career and a company that brings out your best traits.
You can start to figure out what your brand is by:

- Thinking of what words you would use to describe yourself. Ask friends, colleagues, and family members the same thing.
- Thinking about your core competencies and character traits and which ones you want people to associate with you in a professional setting.
- Identifying social traits that you possess and want to incorporate into your professional image and which ones you think you need to minimize.

When talking about building a positive professional image Dr. Laura Morgan Roberts states “when you present yourself in a manner that is both true to self and valued and believed by others, impression management can yield a host of favorable outcomes.” Furthermore, spending time creating an image that is not honest will not be sustainable and will lead to negative consequences professionally and even personally.

Ask yourself - What do I want people to say about me when I am not in the room?
- What am I concerned people say about me when I am not in the room?

Your strategy should include a few different facets including:

**Quality of Work** – be on-time, accurate, and responsive. Remember the qualities most admired in an employee are competence, character and commitment, so try to demonstrate these at every turn.

**Physical Appearance** – professional dress, make-up, and accessories that reflect your personality but are appropriate to the industry that you work in and the corporate culture.

**Responsiveness** – keep on top of your emails, voicemails and respond to priorities, particularly those that impact someone else’s ability to do their work.

**Accountability** – we would all like to be right all of the time, but you will gain more respect if you are willing to take responsibility when something does not go as planned.

**Communication and Listening** – In addition to being responsive you want your communication to be clear, concise and respectful. Take the time to listen to others and take on their ideas. DO NOT SEND Flame Mail – if someone has made you angry or sent you an email that has infuriated you, go directly to the person to discuss the issue (once you have calmed down) never write an angry email, as I guarantee it will get forwarded, misread and only come back to haunt you.

**Basic Office Etiquette** – avoid being too loud or disruptive, particularly if you work in a cubicle setting. Be sensitive about what you bring for lunch (tuna salad and hard boiled eggs could leave everyone suffering from the smell for the rest of the afternoon). Respect people’s privacy (again in a cubicle setting you may overhear personal conversations etc. Do not spread gossip.) If you break it fix it. Do not leave the photocopier jammed or out of paper, do not leave a mess in the lunch room . . .

Your co-workers are not your personal assistants and even if someone is, it is not their job to clean up after you. It just shows that you are considerate and respectful if you look after things. Be punctual for work and meetings in particular. It is so rude to leave others waiting and it sends the message that your time is more important than theirs.

If you take some time to discover who you are in a professional setting, what your best qualities are, what you bring to a team and then try to reflect those qualities in your behaviour, dress, and work then you will find that not only will you feel more confident, but you will be more likely to achieve success and find yourself in a career that is well suited to you.