

Power of Apparel: A Look That Conveys a Message

To tour an assembly plant in Canada, [Sergio Marchionne](#), the chief executive of [Chrysler](#), wore a black sweater and a checked oxford shirt.

At the [North American International Auto Show](#) in Detroit, Mr. Marchionne wore a black sweater and a checked oxford shirt. And at a Saturday night gala honoring [Lee A. Iacocca](#) in Los Angeles, he wore a black sweater and a checked oxford shirt.

Mr. Marchionne, who last year earned more than 5 million euros (\$6.9 million) and owns luxury houses in three countries, has donned a monochromatic wardrobe similar to that worn by other top-flight executives. He has discovered the power of dressing down, and not just on Fridays.

“The message he wanted to pass is not wearing a tie, not wearing a suit, means we are more flexible and what really matters is not the uniform but something else,” said [Cristiano Carlutti](#), the former head of used cars at [Fiat](#), which Mr. Marchionne also heads.

Today, corporate executives have a wider choice of what to wear than ever before. Stylists and personal shoppers reserve exclusive clothes, Hong Kong tailors make office visits and silk ties from France can be delivered overnight.

Yet the bare-bones personal uniform is being seen in some corner offices as the ultimate power suit.

“I always used to feel sorry for them,” [David Wolfe](#), creative director of the trend-forecasting company the Doneger Group, said of the single-outfit executives. “Now, maybe, I think they’re smart.”

He added, “How do you stand out if everybody’s trendy? The only way is to be beyond the trend.”

[Mark Zuckerberg](#), chief executive of [Facebook](#), wears hoodies and sneakers. [Andrea Jung](#), chief executive of Avon Products, sticks with sleeveless sheaths — often red — and pearls. The television personality [Simon Cowell](#) and the fashion designer [Roberto Cavalli](#) wear jeans, T-shirts and black blazers.

[Joe Scarborough](#), the host of MSNBC’s “Morning Joe,” takes regular ribbings about his day-in, day-out fleece jacket and jeans. A Facebook group is campaigning for [Michael Kors](#), a designer and judge on the show “Project Runway,” to change his ensemble (also jeans, T-shirt and black blazer), which he has worn for nearly all eight seasons of the show.

[Steven P. Jobs](#), the chief executive of [Apple](#), wears New Balance sneakers, Levi’s and black

mock turtlenecks, while [Lawrence J. Ellison](#), the chief of [Oracle](#), dons black mock turtlenecks, usually topped with a blazer.

The motivations vary, but every uniform sends a message. Mr. Scarborough, a Republican who is the host of a program on a left-leaning cable network, may be signaling that he is a “mellow, fleece-wearing Republican that Democrats love to like,” [wrote New York magazine](#). Mr. Jobs, by most accounts, prefers the nondescript attire as a way to de-emphasize individuality in favor of promoting a collective approach at Apple. And Thierry Rautureau, a Seattle chef who tops every outfit with a hat, wears the distinctive style for branding purposes.

Mr. Wolfe, the fashion forecaster, switched to a single outfit last summer as a protest against how accessible trends had become.

“It is fashion snobbery or elitism that made me think, ‘I want to make sure people know I’m not just a player in a game that too many people are playing,’ ” he said.

While he used to go to work in “Tibetan Indian clothes, cowboy outfits, a baseball uniform one season, often street-cleaner jumpsuits and things like that,” he said, he has altered his look in the last several months to wearing white L. L. Bean oxford shirts and Levi’s 501s every day.

“People are really coming to grips with the fact that the recession is the new normal. We’re not going to get over it and go back to a wild and crazy extravagant time right away. I think that’s starting to affect the way people are presenting themselves to the world at large, with a very conservative fashion approach,” he said.

Some executives land on a statement piece that broadcasts their brand, as Mr. Rautureau did when he wore a fedora to one of his restaurants.

“A great customer of mine was sitting at the first table, and looked at me, and went, ‘Oh, the chef in the hat,’ ” he said. “I snapped my finger and went, ‘Marketing, marketing, marketing.’ ”

Mr. Rautureau trademarked the chef-in-the-hat name, and has amassed about 20 hats — straw, cowboy and felt — that he wears whenever he leaves his house. “It has been very successful in terms of, obviously, recognition and branding — I can tell you, everywhere I go, they know the guy in the hat, the chef in the hat,” he said. “So it’s easy to be catchy.”

Still, Mr. Rautureau concedes that he may have gotten too attached to his signature chapeau. After a fund-raiser in Cincinnati, he was mugged while walking back to his hotel, and a group of teenagers ran off with his hat.

“Now, most normal people would have run away and go to the hotel, which was only like two or three blocks away,” Mr. Rautureau said. “Instead, I went back, and said I need my

hat back. And of course that was a dumb move because we get in a fight and they take my wallet, and blah blah blah. That was the most dangerous move I've ever made, because of my hat."

For Mr. Jobs, the turtleneck-and-jeans outfit seems to be about reducing his persona to spotlight the product.