



The little black dress

Take one basic element, and transform it into many different looks

By Lauren Stiglich
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On any given Saturday, Susan Stockwell is at work by 8 a.m. She's buzzing around the main ballroom of the Joliet Junior College Renaissance Center, skirting tables, checking details and coordinating with staff.

It takes hours before everything is ready, but her work has barely begun.

When the ballroom is finished and decorated, it's time for Stockwell to hurry home, throw on some makeup, pick out an outfit and go back for another eight-hour shift.

She is a wedding planner, event coordinator, marketing director and the sole person in charge of all functions for the Renaissance Center. Put simply, it's her job to plan parties. It's also her job to look good while doing it.

Stockwell has to dress to impress, be comfortable and do it all on a reasonable budget.

With several events a week, it would be impossible to buy a new outfit for every occasion.

And with holiday party invitations filling your mailbox daily, it's most likely impossible for you to buy a new outfit for every cocktail party, gala and work party this month.

So here are a few style tips from the experts and professionals to keep you looking good this season...while staying within your holiday budget.

Cha-ching!

Black is back!

Did it really ever go anywhere?

Coco Chanel always said, "I want to create the classics." In 1926, the famous designer launched the first little black dress, creating decades of elegance, simplicity and timeless fashion.

Even today, the most essential item any woman can own this season is a Little Black Dress, or the "LBD."

Fashion writer Cynthia Nellis says that the LBD is the answer to every "What should I wear to..." question from cocktail parties to class reunions.

And unlike the trends that drive the fashion world, the little black dress remains much unchanged and still utterly chic.

So if you've got a stack of invites on your kitchen counter and a closet full of clothes, but still nothing to wear...behold the Little Black Dress and this season's accessories that are the answers to all your questions.

Style expert Alison Deyette runs www.stylebakery.com, a Web site completely devoted to style ideas and advice, as well as looks of the moment. She's also a style contributor for NBC's "Today Show."

Deyette says there are several ways to make the same black dress go from day to evening to elegant. There are a few things to look for when picking out the perfect black frock.

"In general, simpler is better. The more simple the dress, the more easily it will convert looks."

Deyette says when looking for a black dress you don't want one with beadings and sequins and "foo-foo" because people will remember when you wear it over and over.

Overly-embellished dresses are also more difficult to accessories.

"Also, if you are shopping for a new black dress, make sure to get one that will work all year long and not just around the holidays, to get the most wear," Deyette says.

So whether you have the perfect black dress or you're already planning your trip to the mall, here are some ideas on how to take the same dress and make it look completely different. You'll definitely have your husband or boyfriend fooled...and maybe even your best friend.

Look No. 1

This all-black look is perfect for a holiday party.

Stockwell says she would wear this outfit to work for a fun party. Something that's not quite as elegant as a gala, but still requires a dressy outfit.

"I love to wear all black for work. I know everything matches and it makes it easy for me to mix and match my wardrobe."

Stockwell also says it's her job to look nice but not be in the spotlight.

She's wearing a black blazer and boots with the little black dress.

She added one of the key accessories of the season, an embellished belt, to dress up the look.

Deyette suggests if you want to make this look funkier for daytime, you could add a black and white-striped T-shirt and black ankle boots a la "Pretty Woman."

Look No. 2

As soon as Stockwell put on this animal-print, she exclaimed, "I love it! This is me — fun!"

She would wear this outfit if she was working a wedding.

"I think this look is a great mixture of fun and elegant. And if I wanted to change it up, I could make the belt a scarf and add a brooch."

The look is also really comfortable. It's a simple shirt over the dress.

The scarf is actually part of the shirt that Stockwell tied around her waist.

She prefers high heels because she's short, but Deyette suggests an easy variation to this look is a pointed-toe shoe with a kitten heel.

Look No. 3

This is the gala outfit.

Stockwell says the shoes sparkle, and the jewelry sparkle, and she would add glitter to her collarbone and makeup to make herself sparkle even more.

The look is still practical while being dressy.

It's a collared white shirt that gathers by three encrusted brooches, but the shoes make the outfit.

If you have a pair of simple pumps you can get the same look by buying a pair of matching brooches and pinning them to the top of the shoe.

Outfit 2

Outfit 1

Outfit 3

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Susan Stockwell, party planner and girl about town at Louis Joliet Renaissance Center, models different looks based on one little black dress, by Sangria, for \$89. All looks are compliments of Carson Pirie Scott. Fashions can be found at Westfield Shoppingtown, Louis Joliet locations. Carson's even offers a special events coordinator to help you pick out the perfect dress. For details, call the store at (815) 439-2000.