

## **Coordinate Your Outfit with Your Office: Easy Tips for Fitting In**

They announce the Savvy Girl competition on our very first morning.

We're barely two hours into our eight-week stint as interns at Savvy magazine when Georgie Brungart, the editor in chief, explains that in honor of the magazine's twenty-fifth anniversary, she's adding a new page called Savvy Girl and it's to be written by, yes, a Savvy Girl.

This statement sets off a murmur of excitement in the conference room. The entire staff of Savvy has gathered for a breakfast welcoming the summer interns. This is not only my first company-sponsored meal but also my first corporate meeting, and so far everything is going according to plan. I expect croissants and sliced melon and murmur-inducing statements from the editor in chief. I spent weeks fantasizing about what my first day at Savvy would be like and am hugely relieved that it's already all that I've imagined. (Who says television doesn't represent life realistically?)

The girl next to me passes the fruit tray, and I take three slices of cantaloupe. I'd much rather have a croissant, but I'm afraid of leaving a crummy mess. I want to make a great impression.

So far I'm not going a very good job. My outfit—a gray pinstripe skirt to my knees topped with a white collared shirt—isn't the height of corporate-casual chic I imagined it was when I was getting dressed this morning. Far from looking professional and glamorous, I look dowdy and boring. Everyone else is wearing bright DayGlo colors like they've just stepped out of a Savvy layout—June's spread on New York summer style, to be precise (“Purse Overboard: Shed your

hefty winter satchel in favor of a whimsical wristlet. Your shoulder with thank you”). Even my three fellow interns got the memo. The girl across from me is wearing a silver cami and hot pink skirt. The intern to her right is sporting almost the exact same thing, except her top is cotton and her micromini is sky blue.

I feel like such a dork.

When the room is quiet again, Georgie continues. “As many of you know, high school seniors now rank *Savvy* as their favorite magazine, ahead of *Allure* and *Glamour*. We want to develop that readership, to nourish and watch it grow as we ourselves grow. With a little effort and the help of each and every one of you, I know that one day very soon *Savvy* will be the most widely read women’s magazine in the United States. You know we can do it. To that end—”

Georgie pauses when the cheering becomes too loud. Everyone is thrilled by the idea of *Savvy*’s superstellar success and we can’t help clapping excitedly, even me, who has worked here for less than two hours. A few editors hoot and the dark-haired girl next to me says “you bet” as she fist-pumps the air. It’s like being at a high school pep rally but different because we’re rallying around something real and important, not a crappy football team that always finishes second to last.

“To that end,” Georgie says over the lingering noise, “we’re going to have a high school student write the column. She’ll be a senior, college-bound and very smart. She’ll address the issues of the day but from a seventeen-year-old’s point of view, adding a fresh perspective to the magazine and giving readers the straight dope.”

Hearing “straight dope,” I cringe. George has been using slang like that all morning without any irony. She seems to think it’s okay for fortysomething editors in high-rise Manhattan office buildings to try to talk like teenagers. It’s supposed to make her look with it, but all it does is make her look silly. If I were to write the Savvy Girl page my first column would be about older people trying to sound young and vice versa. My advice: Act your age (unless your age happens to be too young to drink. In that case, act twenty-one).

“The search for the Savvy Girl begins right now,” she says. The tray of melon and strawberries lands in front of her and she selects a few pieces as she talks. “This year, we’ve assembled a talented assortment of interns from high schools across the country. Each of these aspiring young journalists, who you’ve just met today—Lara, Hallie, Beth and Chrissy—has what it takes to be the Savvy Girl, but only one will get the honor. The question that remains is which one. So, ladies,” she says, looking at each of us in turn, “are you up for the challenge?”

I’m so shocked I don’t know what to say. The idea of my very own page in my most favorite magazine ever is so exciting, so incredibly exhilarating, I can barely form a complete thought, let alone a whole sentence. The possibilities are staggering. It’s... It’s... It’s everything I’ve ever wanted. Seriously: a dream come true. And not simply because having my own national column at the age of seventeen would be beyond prestigious. No, as much as I’d love the fame (imagine: girls in faraway places like Des Moines, Iowa, and Eugene, Oregon, knowing my name) and admiration (admissions officers at Columbia would have

to let me in, right?), the straight-dope reason I want to be the Savvy Girl is I have something important to contribute. I've spent years carefully observing my peers and the culture at large and know for a fact that I can add to the national debate. I am a point of light. And if my fellow students at Roosevelt High look at me a little differently, perhaps with respect in their eyes, well, that's just icing.

My heart racing wildly, I take several deep breaths to calm down. It's too soon to get excited or to envision the sort of letters my readers will send ("Dear Chrissy: Thank you for your insightful article on race relations. It has changed my life"). First I have to get it. The selection process will probably be as long and complicated as the application for the internship itself. I had to beat thirty-two hundred candidates, fill out seven forms, get four recommendations, write three essays and survive one tribunal with every senior editor at Savvy hammering questions at me like supreme court judges on speed.

As if reading my thoughts, Georgie raises her hand to silence the chatter and says, "The selection process will be simple and straightforward. All we need from each candidate is a 1,000-word writing sample in the style you think most appropriate. You are, in effect, writing your first column. I, along with Lisa and Donna"—executive editor and features director, respectively—"will read the entries and decide who will write the Savvy Girl page for a full year, starting in January with our special twenty-fifth anniversary issue. The Savvy Girl will get a ten thousand dollar scholarship toward the school of her choice. Stories are due Friday, August 23, one week before your internship ends to give you the

opportunity to incorporate as much as you learned here as possible. We will announce the winner at the good-bye breakfast for the interns on their last day.”

August 10th is seven weeks away, which gives me plenty of time to write the perfect Savvy Girl article. The hard part will be finding the right theme. My topic will have to be extremely relevant, something that really speaks to the young women of today. Maybe even controversial, like abortion. That’s certainly relevant to my generation. I jot down the idea in my notebook to keep on the back burner. It’s a good start.

“If you have any questions, please feel free to ask Lisa. She has all the details,” Georgie says, taking off her retro sixties glasses (cat eyes—so cool) and folding them in front of her.

The meeting breaks up a few minutes later, and as people file out of the room, I wrap two croissants in a napkin for lunch. As interns, we only get ten dollars a day to cover food and travel costs, which doesn’t really cover anything. The train from Long Island alone runs four dollars per trip.

While I’m walking back to my desk, I hear someone call, “Hey, Chrissy.” I turn around to see Hallie a few steps behind. She’s the intern in the beauty department (I’m in health) and sits one cube closer to the window than me. I have a sliver of sky while she has an honest-to-God chunk. Not that I’m here for the view, of course.

“Isn’t this the best thing ever?” she asks, her eyes sparkling with excitement. Hallie’s very pretty, with shoulder-length brown hair that flips up at the end and freckles across her nose. Her frame is tiny; she barely reaches my

shoulder, so I feel huge walking next to her, which is insane. I'm only five-foot-five. Not exactly a giant.

"It's a great opportunity," I agree.

Hallie also took a doggie bag from the meeting but she went with the healthy option of melon and strawberries. She stops in the kitchen to grab a bottle of Evian from the fridge. I didn't know there was water in the fridge, let alone that we are allowed to take it (um, I didn't even know there was a fridge). "Any ideas what you're gonna write about?"

Although I have thoughts, I'm not naïve enough to share them. Savvy Girl is a cut-throat competition like *American Idol*. The editors might as well have America call in to vote on who they like best. "No. I'll have to think about it for a while. You?"

She shrugs. "I don't want to zoom in on something too soon but I have a pretty good idea of what I want to do."

I nod casually like I'm not intimidated by her decisiveness. "That's cool. You can get started right away."

"I know. I think I'll do some tonight," she says.

At the end of the hallway, I pause to figure out which direction to go but Hallie turns to the right without even looking. Wow. She has a Savvy Girl topic *and* knows her way around. It's so annoying.

As we walk to our cubes, I take a good look around. Clutter, I see right away, is vital for making the right impression. All the editors have piles and piles of paper on their desk and colorful sticky notes posted everywhere. My work

station is disturbingly bare. I don't have anything but a Webster's word-a-day calendar and a framed snapshot. If I want to fit in, I'll have to start acquiring clutter immediately.

When I get back to my desk, I put the croissant-filled napkin and free Evian in a drawer and reach for a manila folder. I write "Word, Daily" on the label, then tear off July 5th (Pyrric: achieved at excessive cost <a *Pyrric* victory>), even though the day isn't done. I stick it in the folder, which I place in a metal stand on my desk. I lean back in my chair, swivel back and forth a few times to get a one-eighty view and decide it's a strong start. Next I create a file called memos and print out everything that's been sent to my e-mail account at Mulhville-Moore Publishing, Savvy's parent company. It's not much but it's important stuff like hiring announcements (a new VP of marketing!) and changes to the 401(k) plan. Two folders look twice as good as one. My in-box is pathetically low, so I add a stack of blank photocopy paper to fill it out and put the staff phone list on top.

My desk now has that disorganized, professional appearance, but the shelves are still bare. All I have is a dictionary and the employee handbook. I stare at them for a while, wondering how to fix it, then inspiration strikes. Duh. I work at a magazine.

I pick up twelve recent issues of Savvy from the closet outside Georgie's office and put them on the top shelf.

There, I think, eyeing my handiwork, perfect. Now I can start writing deeply meaningful articles about the important health issues facing young women today. All I need is an assignment.

“Looks good,” says Hallie admiringly. She’s standing over my shoulder, watching.

A hot blush covers my cheeks. It’s so embarrassing to be caught beefing up your work space.

I shrug like I’m not completely flustered, and Hallie takes this as a cue to come visit. Her desk is as bare as mine used to be, but she has a copy of *The New York Times* next to her computer. Nice touch.

Hallie picks up my calendar. If she happens to notice that it’s one day ahead, she doesn’t comment on it. “This is neat,” she observes, “I used to have one just like it in junior high. My grandmother got it for me for Christmas.”

Next she picks up the snapshot, which is of me with a wax sculpture of the Dalai Lama at Madame Tussaud’s (the one in Times Square, not even London, because it’s not like I’ve actually ever left the country; Canada so doesn’t count). It’s not the best photo I’ve ever taken but it’s one of my dad’s favorites. He handed it to me this morning as we stepped outside Penn Station. He said, “You forgot your good luck charm.” Harmless enough words but you should have seen the pride in his eyes—he and his little girl commuting together. Like it was something he dreamed of from the moment the nurse handed me to him in the maternity ward.

“Oh, the Dalai. Isn’t he fabulous?” Hallie says in a mushy, gushy tone. “I saw him at Rutgers in Jersey. Had my mind totally blown. Didn’t you?”

I open my mouth to explain that it’s just a wax statue but she doesn’t give me a chance. “How long did you have to wait to meet him? I waited two hours but

it was so worth it. Look at him. Doesn't he just exude wisdom?" She sighs. Then wrinkles her nose. "He doesn't look right."

"What?" How can she tell? You can barely see the Sting statue's left hand in the background.

"When you saw him speak, was he sick or something? He looks all waxy here."

It's the perfect time to jump in with: Funny you should mention wax. But I can't do it. In a blinding flash, I can see it clearly—how pathetically juvenile it is to not only take your photo with a fake celebrity but to go to Madame Tussaud's at all (even the one in London). It's so younger sister in junior high, and I know Hallie will say so.

"You think so?" I say, grabbing the photo out of her hand. I examine it closely for evidence of fraud, but he still seems real enough to me. Bald head, kindly smile, saffron robe—there's nothing here to raise suspicion. Unless one had extra sensory perception. "That's weird. He was in top form that day. Look at that furrowed brow. I think he'd just said something insightful about the oppressiveness of the Chinese government. I'm pretty sure the woman behind me in line started crying. Anyway, this is some intern program, huh? I loved the breakfast we got this morning. The croissants were delish. Did you try one?"

It seems like a reasonable question, even if the topic change isn't the smoothest one in the world (um, can you say free association), but she doesn't fall for it. She narrows her eyes. My heart drops.

“It’s fake, isn’t it?” she asks, her tone gleeful—and loud. It was amazing how far sound travels in the large office. An editor two rows over raises her head. I lower mine. “It’s, like, you and a cardboard cutout or something.”

I nod. She’s seeking confirmation and I give it. I don’t know why. Everyone knows what you’re supposed to do: deny, deny, deny.

“Gosh, that’s so cute. You take pictures with wax statues and then pass them off as real people. Does anyone fall for it? Here, let’s see,” she says, her tone amused, not vicious, as she stops the first person to walk by: the health editor, Lois McQuilken. Aka my new boss.

I want the earth to swallow me up where I stand.

“Lois, have you seen this photo of Chrissy and the Dalai Lama?” she asks easily, not at all self-conscious about wasting an important senior editor’s time with the most trivial matter in the world. I’m amazed at her nerve.

Although Lois is clearly in the middle of something important (she’s holding a ton of layouts—can Hallie not see that?), she doesn’t mind stopping. “The Dalai Lama?” she asks, leaning in to look at the photo.

“Yes, the Dalai Lama,” Hallie replies, winking at me as if I’m in on the joke. Like: We’re both putting one over on the unsuspecting editor.

The moment is excruciating. I don’t know what I expected to happen—it seems unlikely that an important Savvy editor would care one way or another about my snapshot—but I feel a sense of impending doom. The world is about to end.

But I'm entirely wrong. The world doesn't end; the humiliation goes on and on.

"Good shot," Lois says with a smile. "We've got some great new retin-A products if you get breakouts like that a lot. "

Breakout? What breakout? My skin had been perfectly clear that day (otherwise: no photos). Okay, so maybe there was one little pimple on my forehead. But it was tiny. Like a pinprick. She couldn't possibly see that, could she? And if so, does that really constitute a breakout? And what about now? I have a million blackheads on my chin. I can't help it. I'd been so stressed about starting the internship that new ones keep popping up daily no matter how much cream I apply.

"I think we have some in the beauty closet," Lois continues, entirely unaware that her casual observation has sent me into a tailspin. "I'll take a look later."

"Thank you. I'd appreciate that," I say, amazed at how calm I sound. I thought for sure my voice would be sad and pathetic. Like the pipsqueaky little bleep of a mouse.

"No problem. One of the perks of the job is getting to raid the beauty closet. Remind me to show it to you later," Lois says before walking away. Seconds later, she disappears inside the executive editor's office.

Delighted with the experiment, Hallie shows the photo to everyone in a three-cube radius. She starts with our fellow high school interns. Lara, assigned to the entertainment editor, giggles and asks me who else I've "met." Beth, who's

in the articles department, is already too busy to make small talk. She simply rolls her eyes, which is an indictment all on its own. My cheeks burn.

Hallie then moves onto the low-level assistants around us. Most of them are too distracted by work to pay attention. They're all typing emails or picking up dry-cleaning or making lunch reservations, so the experience is slightly less humiliating. Not wanting to seem like a poor sport (I can totally laugh at myself), I try to ride it out with quiet dignity. I plaster a pleasant smile on my face while seething and imagining how humiliated Hallie will be when I win the Savvy Girl competition. (Someone should really be filming this. Why don't we have our own show on MTV)

The whole thing seems almost bearable but then disaster strikes: The fashion editor, Jessica Cordero, drops by to find out which hotel her assistant booked the models into for the Jamaica shoot and notices us clustered around a neighboring desk. She peeks her head over and asks what's up.

Suddenly my knees go weak and I have to clutch the cube wall for support. The blood in my head starts pounding.

Of all the editors at Savvy, Jessica Cordero intimidates me the most. Blue-eyed and blond, with a tiny, ski-jump nose, she's everything a fashion editor should be: tall, thin, beautiful, chic, British (her accent is faint, like Madonna's, but totally genuine). Her life is one glamorous event after another—runway shows, photo shoots, opening parties—and her personal wardrobe is augmented by the miles of clothing in the fashion closet. Free travel, free clothes, free food—her life is perfect.

Usually I'm not a fashion groupie. I like clothes but I don't obsess over them like some people. They serve a practical function: to make me look good (sometimes better than others). But Jessica Cordero is more than a fashion editor. She's a role model, an icon, an example of everything I want to be when I grow up.

Her life story is simple but storybook: At fourteen she was discovered by the fashion director of British *Vogue* while shopping with her friends at a flea market. At fifteen she appeared in runway shows for all the top designers in Milan, Paris, London and New York. At eighteen, she quit modeling to go to college. She wanted to live a normal life: to hang out with friends, eat hot fudge sundaes, obsess about boys and feel better about her body. She graduated Cambridge at the top of her class, moved to Manhattan, got a job as a lowly assistant editor at *Savvy* and worked her way up in three years to become the youngest fashion editor in New York City.

She could have been the next Heidi Klum—Victoria's Secret had already offered her a million-dollar contract—but she turned it down to pursue something meaningful and real. In one of those character-defining moments when you find out who you really are, she chose substance over style. And that's who I want to be—the person who makes the right decision at crunch time. That's glamour.

Hallie isn't in awe of Jessica and shows her the photo without hesitating. *Her* knees aren't weak. "It's fake," she explains, "but Chrissy likes to pass it off as real. Isn't that adorable?"

The way she says *adorable*—with calculated slowness, emphasizing each syllable in its turn: a-dor-a-ble—makes the situation too painful to bear. Even quiet dignity has its limits.

I turn abruptly and walk away, breezing past my desk. I need to get away—far, far away—from Hallie’s mocking voice. But where to go? The cafeteria? No, it closed ten minutes ago. The stairwell? Too open. Someone might see. The bathroom? Bingo.

But picking a place to go is one thing; finding it is another. I have no idea where anything is (least of all my desk) and I circle the floor three times before somehow stumbling across the right hallway.

By the time I lock myself in a stall, I’m on the verge of tears. I don’t know why I’m so upset. It’s only a stupid photo. Nobody cares. Jessica Cordero definitely doesn’t. She has better things to worry about (models, hotels, Jamaica) than a picture of a nameless intern with the Dalai Lama, real or otherwise. Only Hallie cares, and her interest in the photo reveals more about her than me. In making me look silly she made herself look sillier.

Nevertheless, my heart is racing a million beats per second and my throat is curiously full. Any second now, I’m going to start crying. It’s so pathetic. Only five hours into my career and already I’m behaving like a scared little girl. What kind of journalist does that make me?

The weepy kind, I think mockingly. My editors will send me to cover heart-warming stories like “Panda Gives Birth in Captivity” or “Dog Saved from Burning

Building by One-Armed Fireman.” I might as well give up now and become a greeting-card writer.

It’s too terrible to think about, and I try to pull myself together. I’m made of sterner stuff than this. I have to be. I’m going to be an internationally renowned reporter, and internationally renowned reporters don’t cry. They don’t have any emotions. So I won’t either.

But even as I resolve to be strong and heartless, the tears start falling.