

Nice vs. Ice

Which gets you further:
acting friendly or frosty?

Candace Bushnell, the author of *Sex and the City*, wonders if a woman gets what she wants by being a lady or coming across like a shrew. Here, she is transformed into fall's most extreme looks, both virtuous and vixen, for *Bazaar's* camera

Photographs by Alix Malka

A couple of weeks ago, I was a guest on a TV show hosted by a television goddess. (Let's call her Pat.) In between takes, one word came up—the word that strikes fear in the hearts of successful women everywhere: *Martha*. Pat looked around nervously. I've known her for years and have always found her fascinating, refreshingly candid and charming. But as one of the city's high-profile female success stories, Pat has had more than her fair share of tough press, and most of it, sadly, from female journalists—something she and Martha Stewart have in common. Bring up Pat's name to a stranger, and people jump eagerly at the opportunity to call her the *B-word*. But when you ask for specifics of said *B-word* behavior, the conversation becomes mysteriously silent. "Well," someone ventured once. "She's a bitch because ... she tells people what to do all the time!"

Hmmmm.

Lately I've been wondering if women like Pat should embrace their inner bitch and act *more wicked*. The first time I met Pat, she actually had a hole the size of a golf ball in her panty hose: Was she trying to disguise her power and status with that faux-demure (panty hose!), deeply dowdy look (panty hose with a run)? Maybe she should take a page from my high-powered, fabulous fashionista friend Jane. Like Pat, Jane is brilliant at what she does, but appears to be constructed so entirely of angles you get the feeling that if you were to brush up against her, you might actually get cut. But scratch the surface, and what you discover is that Jane has a touching vulnerability. I'll never forget the time when she explained why she dressed so severely. In her low, froglike voice, she croaked sadly, "It's for protection."

Ever since smart women decided to trade in their glasses for contact lenses and began highlighting their mousy brown hair, the world has been gunning for the powerful dame (even if, deep down, she's secretly a softy). Remember Sigourney Weaver in *Working Girl*? Nasty. (Although she did try to appear >



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Does being sweet bring success? The author as Princess Diana. Blouse, \$550, **Luella**. Showroom Seven, NYC; 212-643-4810. Skirt, \$830, **Marc Jacobs**. 212-924-6126. Bracelet, **Isaac Manevitz for Ben-Amun**. 212-944-6480. See Where to Buy for details. Fashion editor: **Jill Swid**

"nice" by wearing a white hairbow.) Or the ultimate—Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction*? She, too, tried the white trick in order to appear "nice," but underneath those flowy dresses, she was murderously insane. In the real world, women in positions of authority still tend to make us suspicious. How did they get there? And why them and not us? The real answer—"they rose at five A.M. every day and worked their darn butts off!"—is not particularly glamorous or appealing, so most people assume an easy answer: They must have terrified their way to the top. But should a girl work it—or underplay her power and position by being sweet and understated?

Appearances can be deceiving—and useful. As Karl Lagerfeld once said, "Apparently, I am very scary. But if you get to know me, you see that I am very nice. Happily, I don't look like I am." Indeed, some of the nicer women in business have figured out that an "ice" look guarantees that other people don't walk all over them, especially high-powered men. Take my friend Monique, a big-deal movie producer. In her personal life, she's always mothering her friends, cooking dinners for them and lending them money and advice. But in business, she's a different story. She wears only black Armani, and she pulls her blonde hair into a bun so severe that her hairdresser told her that if she didn't stop, her hair was going to start falling out. On the other hand, when Monique walks into a room, you know she's in charge—and it doesn't hurt that she's six feet tall. "I could dress nice," she says, "but the problem is, no one would believe it. Who wants to see a six-foot-tall woman in ruffles? They want ice, and I give it to them."

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Cindi, the president of a major talent agency. If you didn't know who Cindi was, you'd never think she held such a high position of power, a fact she uses to her advantage. She's a tiny, adorable little thing who looks like a child and dresses in flowery fabrics and Peter Pan collars. No one ever suspects that such an innocent-looking creature could possibly be a secret killer, and by the time they figure it out, it's too late.

The point is that both nice and ice are valid options, as long as you don't take it to extremes, in which case the result is either a) everyone hates you, or b) you become a joke. It's one thing to look pleasantly approachable, like Princess Di, but quite another to fashion yourself as a frosted supermarket sheet cake. Remember Barbara Cartland, whose favorite accessory was a fluffy little dog? Or Mary Kay Ash, of Mary Kay cosmetics? Instead of her coming off as sweet and harmless, people always wondered what kind of freakish behavior she was trying to cover up. And, of course, the ultimate, Tammy Faye Bakker. Too much pink, velvet hairbands, inappropriate bows and light-blue eyeshadow will always backfire.

All of this got me thinking the other day about a very nice cosmetics executive I know who suddenly ended up running the whole company. She decided that in order to succeed, she needed to change herself into ice. She lost 15 pounds and began wearing spike heels and tight black skirts with architectural blouses. She also developed a disdainful sneer. The change was so great that no one could accept it, and her formerly adoring colleagues took out the long knives; she was fired within a year. She has now gone back to wearing flower-print dresses.

Conducting your life as the walking embodiment of winsome or wicked is a fascinating strategy. However, studies have shown that the psychologically healthiest and most successful people are able to pull off the what-you-see-is-what-you-get look. Trouble arises when people think they're getting Laura Ingalls and end up with Leona Helmsley. In other words, it may be boring, but it really is like Mother always said: All you have to do is be yourself. And that, happily, leads us to a third category of presentation, and one that is not likely to be explored in this magazine. I call it the no-fashion look. In other words, you are

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so powerful, successful and secure that you don't have to worry about what you wear at all. You throw on any old thing that's in your closet—like an Oprah sweatshirt and ratty old jeans, or a Laura Ashley sweater that's 20 years old. You get a haircut only every six months, and you have the same hairstyle you had in college. I know it sounds astounding, but lately I've seen more and more women (especially women in their forties and fifties) successfully adopting this "look." My favorite example is a woman I'll call Nancy. Nancy is the most powerful and fearsome entertainment lawyer in Hollywood—so frightening that even the short older men who run all the studios are afraid of her. The first time I met her was at a meeting at a movie company. The female executives were all wearing sleek Armani suits with perfectly coiffed hair. And then in came Nancy. She marched in wearing khakis, Converse high-top sneakers and a polo shirt. I looked at her with awe. Only a woman who is really powerful could get away with looking like that. Despite the fact that Nancy basically tells you, point-blank, that she enjoys biting the heads off her enemies and is looking forward to her next meal, there is something strangely reassuring about women like her. Think about it: No one is envious of her because of her fifty-thousand-dollar designer wardrobe, and the message she sends is clear: This is a woman who spends her time doing actual business instead of futzing around with nail polish colors. Which brings us to the obvious conclusion: It doesn't really matter if you're nice or ice, just as long as you always get the job done. ■

All names have been changed.

Candace Bushnell's most recent book, the New York Times bestseller Trading Up, is now in paperback (Hyperion).

Trouble arises
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Ingalls and end up
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Candace Bushnell tries on a more wicked guise. Dress with fox-fur trim, \$16,995, Yves Saint Laurent Rive Gauche. 800-932-3485. Ring, her own. See Where to Buy for details. Hair: Stephen Lacey for Redken; makeup: Eric Polito for Christian Dior; manicure: Angela Marinescu

