

How We Live: Briefcase backlash evident



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(Photo: Karen Croke/The Journal News)

From Neal Fox's perspective, there's no need to hold onto the past. And he means that literally.

Fox is the CEO of Mark Cross, the luxury leather goods company known worldwide for its fine luggage, handbags, wallets — and briefcases.

For more than a generation, a classic briefcase was a rite of passage when starting a first job. These hard-backed rectangular bags came standard with a combination lock and a small handle. Most suburban commuters carried one. Not anymore.

Check out any train platform, park-and-ride or bus stop and chances are you'll see plenty of backpacks.

Briefcases? Yeah, no.

"I actually had an attache," says Fox, who agrees the halcyon era of Dashing Dans toting leather briefcases has passed. "The world has changed so dramatically with the casualization of the workplace that the idea of the classic briefcase has just been torn asunder."

Kevin Lange used to carry a briefcase on his Metro-North Railroad commute from Pleasantville to Manhattan, but says "I found that it would eventually become so heavy that it was annoying." On Tuesday, Mike Rowe hurried to catch a bus on Broadway in Nyack, a black leather backpack slung over his shoulder. "Gave it up in the '90s," he said of owning a briefcase.

Millennials, like my son, who is 24, don't even have a briefcase frame of reference. "They seem pretty limited in space," he says. "I mean, what could you fit in there besides papers?" His Northface backpack, on the other hand, has pockets for everything.

As a response to briefcase backlash, Mark Cross now sells an array of professional alternatives, from soft leather messenger bags and laptop bags to a modern — and roomy — version of the briefcase that includes a laptop pocket. "The classic approach has gone by the boards," says Fox.

Westchester etiquette expert Melissa Leonard says "the digital age has definitely made people in business ditch their briefcase for the backpack."

Leonard believes the dearth of briefcases has nothing to do with relaxed dress codes or alternative workplaces. It all about functionality, with busy workers toting everything from a morning protein shake to workout clothes to an iPad in their bags.

What exactly then is a work-appropriate bag? It's definitely not your ratty college backpack. Opt for a good quality backpack in a neutral shade; a messenger bag or cross-shoulder bag are great options, too, says Leonard.

"When I asked my husband why he carried a backpack he said, 'it's impossible to do anything and hold onto briefcase'," says Leonard. "You need to be hands-free. Plus, a briefcase is like a man purse."

Enough said.

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