



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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## Professional Image in the Workplace: Is it Important? Image Matters

by Maureen Costello

People often ask me, “Does a professional image at work really matter?”

**I**n a word, yes. Although we don’t like to think that appearances matter, the fact is that people react to us based on their perceptions. Research shows that people are more likely to hire, promote and do business with us if we look the part.

In fact, managing our personal presentation can be an effective leadership tool, the same as negotiation or strategic thinking. People make decisions about us based on their first impressions, so it’s important to get the personal packaging right. Learning to visually express who we are—highlighting specific characteristics through wardrobe, fit, color and quality—can positively impact our careers. By the same token, presenting a less than professional image can hurt us.

In a business casual world—with an emphasis on casual—many people underestimate the importance of a professional image. People tend to blend in rather than stand out, dressing as casually as the people around them. However, business is emerging from the ultra-casual dot com era, and Generation Xers approaching their forties are seeking looks that reflect their new leadership status. Also, the interest in personal aesthetics is growing, as indicated by the popularity of shows like “What Not to Wear” and “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy.”

This reemergence of interest in personal appearance couldn’t come at a better time. As organizations grow savvier about managing their brands, they are becoming more sensitive to the ways employees impact their corporate images.

In my work as an image management professional, I often participate in closed-door conversations with organizational leaders about

employees who are good performers, but who do not effectively represent the organization’s identity or brand when it comes to their visual presentation.

In one case, the managing partner of a law firm was uncomfortable allowing one of his senior partners to represent the firm at public appearances because he felt that his “fuzzy sweaters” were too casual. Although the law firm had a business-casual policy and the senior partner’s attire was perfectly acceptable at the office, he did not think the partner would present an image that would reflect well on the firm. As it turned out, the partner was open to changing his wardrobe, and, as a result, was given increasing responsibility for representing the company publicly. He was also personally happy with her new look.

In another case, the management of a prominent company wanted to promote a highly valued employee, who had extreme facial hair and a wardrobe filled with old, tattered clothing, to a high-profile position that would require contact with customers. The bottom line was simple: change or lose the otherwise-guaranteed promotion. In this case, the employee decided that he did not want to change his look—a perfectly valid choice. He was still valued by the company, but he did not receive the promotion.

I am frequently hired to work with highly paid, smart but introverted people—often engineers or IT geniuses—who have reached a point in their careers at which further promotions would require representing the corporate brand to the public. Usually, this is the crossroads at which they can decide to upgrade their look or stop moving up. I have had great success with these types of people, sometimes in



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collaboration with life coaches who address any underlying emotional issues as I deal with their outward manifestations.

Often, organizational leaders are uncomfortable addressing these issues with their employees. (And if the bosses are uncomfortable, imagine how the employees feel!) We're taught from the time we're small not to judge a book by its cover, that what matters is what's inside. Discussions about improving your clothing or appearance seem deeply personal, even insulting. But if you think about it, many organizations spend a huge amount of time, effort and expense on their visual brand, poring over paper stocks for their brochures, picking the perfect shade of blue for their logo and debating the tiniest of word choices for an ad or press release. If an organization's people are its greatest marketing tool, then obviously, the way employees come across to the outside world is of the greatest importance. It only makes sense.

If a company cares about the way its employees look, then, obviously, so should its employees—at least, the ones who care about moving up, or even keeping their jobs. Appearance impacts not only employees' promotional opportunities, but also their reputations. And, unfortunately, our appearance says something about who we are, whether or not we focus on it, and whether or not what it says about us is accurate. Given that, we may as well use it to our advantage.

One client of mine was a single mother with three children who planned to reenter the workforce after 10 years of not working outside the home. I worked with her to transform her image of herself and her presentation to reflect the mature, professional, attractive woman she truly was. She received a multitude of job offers, which helped to further build her confidence as she rejoined the professional world.

Another client was a highly intelligent, technical expert who independently realized that she needed to change her image to break out of the ranks of a lower-level manager at

her company. I worked with her over several months, helping her affordably and gradually rebuild her wardrobe from scratch to be more updated and approachable. At the end of the year, she received a big promotion.

One of the most common issues facing many of my clients is dealing with extra pounds that have crept up over the years. As people's bodies change, they may not know how to dress to flatter their new shapes. Indeed, they often don't want to admit to themselves that their shapes have changed, and they certainly don't want to invest in new wardrobes that they hope are temporary. However, learning to adjust to the many physical changes we experience throughout our business careers is important in maintaining a professional image. Regardless of your size or shape, your wardrobe can say that you're strong, confident and stylish—or the opposite.

I help my male and female clients realize that to maintain their leadership positions through the years, they need to update their wardrobes, their hair and even their glasses. The goal is to find flattering ways to express who they are and to develop an image that is age-appropriate, but still fresh and modern enough to compete with the most ambitious up-and-comers.

I also encourage them to make incremental changes, as opposed to radical overhauls, to maintain consistency, which impression management research shows is crucial in building credibility in the workplace. Updating accessories, like briefcases, wallets or glasses, or even getting better haircuts may seem like small changes, but over time, these tweaks add up to a stylish, professional look—which often results in the added benefit of bolstering not only the client's image, but also their self-confidence.

I have also worked with clients whose looks have been considered to be too alluring. One client, whose work wardrobe included

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tailor their résumés to every opening to which they are applying. This is another place where your approach to an engagement bio is different. You do want to tailor your engagement bio to different opportunities.

Come up with a laundry list of engagement bullets you can draw upon for different potential assignments and prospects. Then customize that section of the bio to fit the perceived hot buttons of the particular prospect. However, be careful when customizing the summary or bio section; in fact, generally avoid doing that. There is a great advantage to including the complete (short summary) description of what you bring to the table, even if you only include engagement bullets that address the client's

current, specific needs. An client's needs will evolve, and he or she may have other needs you have yet to uncover. If you don't include the more complete summary, the client may never realize you have those additional skills.

So that even after he or she has hired you for a particular project, the client may go ahead and approach someone else for additional work of which he or she doesn't realize you are capable. Plus, if you do a great job for the client, he or she will become a testimonial to your work. You want the client to say to some other prospect, "Jim did a great job for me, and as I recall he has expertise in the issues you are looking at. You should talk to him." □

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suggestive clothing, never got the exposure she needed to move up because her senior manager kept her out of high visibility meetings. She had become an object of intrigue rather than of substance. With some simple

changes, we developed a look for her that was professional and attractive—as well as perfectly appropriate for meetings at the highest level.

Women who do business internationally need to be sensitive to other cultures, while cultivating an authoritative presence. I worked with one younger-looking client whose tight fitting, high fashion garb disqualified her from high-level meetings abroad. By making better color selections, choosing high quality fabrics, and wearing clothes with a tailored but not tight fit, she developed a more sophisticated look and was soon asked to represent her company with key business contacts overseas.

While having to focus on appearance may seem unfair, it can also be empowering and fun. And, best of all, maintaining a professional image can help us achieve what we deserve in our careers—success! □

