



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

The Stepping Stone

October 2007 – Issue No.28



Image Does Matter: Advancing Your Personal Brand

by Maureen Costello

As children we learn to “never judge a book by its cover.” But as adults working in the business world, it’s difficult to put this old adage into practice.

Often the first thing we notice about a person is what they’re wearing. Clothes are a nonverbal code of communication. What you wear sends out a signal to others about your image—how you feel about yourself. So when people ask “Does a professional image at work really matter?” The answer is always “yes.”

Americans place great importance on visuals. Presidents realize the need to be camera-ready. Celebrities pay top dollar to wear designer clothing that tells the world who they are. And companies spend millions of dollars on a spokesperson that is synonymous with their brand’s image.

Although we don’t like to think that appearances matter, the fact remains that people react to us based on their perceptions. Using the visual signals we put out there, people make assumptions about your competence, personality, habits, tastes, social life and friends. 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, like 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 you are—

highlighting specific characteristics through wardrobe, fit, color and quality—can positively impact your career. By the same token, presenting a less-than-professional image can prevent you from accomplishing your career goals.

Personal and Corporate Brands Go Hand-in-Hand

Although the concept of “business casual” was introduced to make the workplace more comfortable and inviting, it has blurred the lines of what’s appropriate to wear in a professional setting. In a more casual work environment, people tend to underestimate the importance of a professional image. People prefer to blend in rather than stand out, dressing as casually as the people around them.

But today, business is emerging from the ultra-casual dot com era, and Generation X-ers approaching their forties are seeking looks that reflect their new leadership status. 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 way employees impact their corporate brands. Even employees with notable successes in their positions may be held back from advancement because of how they present themselves in a corporate environment. For example:

- The Gen X-er who is a brain trust of ideas at work but presents herself in such a disheveled manner that her clients wonder if her work might be the same.



Maureen Costello M.A., CIP, has worked in the retail and image management field for over 18 years with companies such as Talbot’s and Paul Stuart, in both the wholesale and retail sector for men and women’s wear. She founded Image Launch, (www.image-launch.com) a consulting company that assists companies and individuals internationally in setting standards for visual impact.

- The team manager who has uniformed employees reporting to her, but chooses to dress in inappropriately provocative clothing.
- The successful and well-respected international executive whose credibility is diminished by his low-quality, ill-fitting suits.

Often, organization leaders are uncomfortable addressing these issues with their employees. Discussions about improving clothing or appearance are deeply personal, or even insulting. But if you think about it, many organizations spend a large 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 choice for an ad or press release.

At work, you are the brand. And your look is your personal logo. Your look should clearly communicate who you are, what you have to offer and where you want to go. It's up to you to define your identity and determine the best way to express it in your current work environment. When you decide to put effort into your appearance, you're taking control of your career and your life.

Creating Your Look

On the hit TLC cable show "What Not to Wear," stylists Stacy London and Clinton Kelly are famous for helping clients choose wardrobes that fit their lives. They've been known to tell program participants that dressing well and creating a personal look is about matching the external to the personality within.

The "What Not to Wear" stylists have made names for themselves by helping their clients create professional wardrobes with individual personalities. But with the uniqueness of each outfit is the unifying thread of professionalism.

"Professionalism" means many different things to different people. But in the world of personal image, professionalism is a standard of business practice usually defined through missions and value statements held by the company or organization. Professionalism is an extension of the brand promise of an organization. That includes the manner, decorum, ethics, global business practices across cultures, self-presentation of employees, pride in their work and their interactions with others as a piece of the brand.

Defining the image you want to project comes from an honest assessment of your role, age, responsibility, levels of client contact, work locations and interactions, body type and personal preferences. You must also be mindful of your personal size, skin and hair color and what personal features should be highlighted—like your eyes, jaw structure or neckline.

Professional appearance is created through a wardrobe that connects and

(continued on page 18)



Image Does Matter... • from page 17

complements the human dimensions of the individual (hair, skin, eye tones and body scale). Grooming is also part of the equation—things like trimmed and cleaned nails and styled hair. Attention to detail takes your wardrobe to the next level. Polished shoes. Properly tailored suits, jackets, pants and dresses. Updated eyeglasses. Fresh-looking jewelry and handbags. Neat-looking facial hair on men and well-applied make-up on women. These little things make an enormous impact in establishing your personal signature look.

Even in more conservative industries like banking and insurance, this goal of being true to yourself in how you dress can still be achieved while being conscious of your public. Because financially minded customers are looking for a trusted advisor, it's important that actuaries—regardless of your position—put forth an image

of confidence and credibility. This type of consistent image is important throughout one's career.

Without question, when you invest in your professional image (appearance, behavior and attitude), you'll advance your personal brand. You'll undoubtedly succeed in your career. And you'll boost your self-confidence more than you can possibly imagine.

So how about that closet of yours? ☐

Editor's Note: Catch Part 2 of "Image Does Matter: Advancing Your Personal Brand" in the January 2008 issue of *The Stepping Stone!*