



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Making a Visual Connection

by Maureen Costello

The Florida Keys' tourist board is currently using a tagline of "Come as You Are™" to encourage northerners to escape the chill of winter. While this mindset is enticing vacationers to the beaches, it has also been slowly creeping into the office. We began to see the unspoken "come as you are" dress code during the hi-tech boom days of the mid 1980s. As the globalization of the workplace pushed many workers to around-the-clock schedules, the notion of strict dress codes relaxed. By 2010, researchers predict that the average workweek will be 54 hours long. With longer workdays and more and more hours spent on the job, the expectation that employees wear full suits will continue to wane in many work settings, with some exceptions.

The relaxing of the dress code has been influenced not only by longer work hours, but by a changing demographic in the workforce itself. While past generations traditionally worked with a mostly homogenous group of co-workers, today's professionals must interact with colleagues not just from other cultures, but from different generations as well. This cross-generational labor pool adds an entirely new dimension when making visual connections at work, in part due to the aesthetic values we each ascribe to.

Every generation has an aesthetic expectation that has been hard-wired into its members from a young age—in essence, an aesthetic value. Aesthetic values are the messages we received as children that set the tone for self-presentation. For example, many individuals from the Traditional and Baby Boomer generations were

expected to have combed and parted hair and to dress in pressed garments. Women wore skirts and men's suits were often worn with hats. White clothing was only seen between Memorial Day and Labor Day. In addition to specific wardrobe rules that were determined by societal norms, economic factors contributed to what people wore. With fewer shops and fewer choices, not to mention smaller closets, many Baby Boomers grew up with a small selection of clothes. As adults, they might not see the need for as diverse a wardrobe as workers from later generations who grew up with countless clothing options to fill their large, individual closets.

Generational shift in dress continued into the later 1900s. In the 1970s, more women began to enter the workplace and they were expected to wear matched, skirted suits in dark colors, much like the black and navy suits of men. Today, we see women in skirted and pantied suits of all styles and colors. In turn, men in the 1970s were expected to wear ties if they were in management.

Our aesthetic values are formed from generational influences such as these. As adults, many from the Traditional and Baby Boomer generations show up for work with parted hair and pressed garments and expect their colleagues to do the same. These aesthetic expectations, influenced largely by generational age, extend into many different areas of living. Let's explore some of the nuances of the generations we see in today's work force. Typically, we divide the generations in this way:



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INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Traditionalists: 1900-1945

Baby Boomers: 1946-1964

Generation X: 1965-1980

Generation Y: 1981-2000

According to Arin Reeves of the Athens Group, the four generations are distinct in many ways, one of which is their work ethic. Traditionalists are generally dedicated and deliberate. Baby Boomers can be characterized by a drive to

succeed and win. Generation X workers are balanced and decisive, while Generation Y professionals are strong in their adaptability and creativity.

The four generations not only have different work ethic styles, but very distinct dress codes as well. Examining the generations from the perspective of the Image Launch self-presentation model looks like this:

As adults, many from the Traditional and Baby Boomer generations show up for work with parted hair and pressed garments and expect their colleagues to do the same.

Self-Presentation	Wardrobe Formal	Wardrobe Business Casual	Wardrobe Ultra Casual	Behavior Verbal	Behavior Non-Verbal
Traditionalist (Formal/rule bound)	Matched suit (M) Dress (F)	Jacket with pants (M) Jacket with skirt (F)	Collared shirt and wool trouser (M) Skirt & blouse (F)	Formal/ Reserved/ Local	Formal/ Reserved/ Local
Baby Boomer (Power/prestige)	Matched suit (M) Matched suit Skirt/Pants (F)	Jacket/no jacket with pants (M) Jacket with skirt or pants (F)	Polo shirt and khaki pants (M) Blouse or polo shirt and tailored pant (F)	Formal/ Informal/ Local	Formal/ Informal/ Local/ International
Generation X (Flexible)	Collared woven shirt/tropical weight trouser with a tie/maybe a jacket (M) Sweater set and pants Sometimes a matched pant suit (F)	Knit collared shirt with sweater and khaki pants (M) Blouse with a lower cut and pants (F)	Collarless shirt under collarless sweater and jeans (M) Sweatshirt and jeans(F)	Informal/ Slang Casual/ International	Informal/Slang Casual/ International
Generation Y (Informal/adaptive)	Shirt (maybe a tie) with pants or jeans (M) Blouse, tight top or lacy top and skirt (F)	Fitted collarless shirt in bright colors and jeans (M) Layered lycra top and low cut pants (F)	T-shirt and jeans (M&F)	Bilingual/ Informal shorthand/ Impersonal/ Casual/ International/	Informal/ Unconscious/ Casual/ Impersonal/ International/

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Self-presentation is a crucial component for any professional because on a daily basis, while attempting to make connections with others, we make quick and meaningful visual assumptions based on people's appearances. The impressions we receive are strongly influenced by the generational aesthetic values we, oftentimes unknowingly, maintain. Miscommunication occurs easily and frequently as we live in the paradigm of our individual generational perspectives. For example, a client of mine insists on wearing "perfectly good suits" to the office despite the fact that they are over 20 years old and have giant shoulder pads. A member of the Baby Boomer generation, she looks outdated and "stuck in her ways" to her younger contemporaries with their more stylish and relaxed dress. Conversely, the young college graduate who breaks the corporate code on a daily basis as he dresses for work in unpressed, frayed khakis and a stained polo shirt, looks shabby and unprofessional to his older colleagues.

Another overlaying factor in the shift of workplace apparel is the expansion of inclusion and diversity policies in companies. These policies evolved to include new dress code options as women began to work up until their maternity leaves and to grant religious freedom to those who wear head coverings. Running parallel to these historical changes is the effort many companies try to make in order to reinforce brand identity at a consistent level of market exposure. In an effort to balance perception, companies hope that everyone from the CEO to the vendors heeds to their corporate standard. Self-presentation in dress and behavior (though we have focused on dress in this article) are two ways that a company can distinguish itself.

People are human assets of any organization and, as an extension of the corporate brand, reflect the essence of its mission and values. How employees represent that brand makes a perceived difference to their clients, prospects and vendors. As an example, the motorcycle manufacturer Harley Davidson is committed to the promise of making a high-precision motorcycle. They have a brand image of rebellious, adventure-seeking customers. Their black leather-clad attire, worn by employees and countless customers, fits this image. Google, on the other hand, was founded in the middle of the casual day era. Their relaxed and fun work atmosphere is supposed to lend itself to committed, hardworking employees. Google workers can be found sporting casual dress that reflects their work environment.

As generations blend and workplaces become more multicultural, we will continue to see a greater fluency in professional dress selections, based on the setting in which one is expected to perform. With organizations balancing the complexities of the multigenerational workplace, 24/7 access and globally savvy youth, the rest of us will continue looking to bridge our own images to match the occasion, the locale and the generational situation. □