



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Image Does Matter: Advancing Your Personal Brand (Part 2)

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.”

What’s in Your Closet?

Before heading to the store to restock your wardrobe with appropriate business wear, take inventory of what you currently have in your closet.

- Take everything out of your closets, dressers, laundry basket and storage bins and lay it on your bed.
- Divide your clothes into piles. Suits. Shirts. Pants. Dresses. Skirts. Sport coats. Accessories. Shoes.
- Sort through your piles and place everything torn, stained, well-worn or what you haven’t worn in the last year into a “give-away” pile.
- From the clothes remaining, select out which clothes you could wear to work.

With what you perceive as business wear, do you have the basics?

- Black or brown leather belts
- Black leather dress shoes
- Brief case, card case, portfolio and pen
- Handbag large enough to hold your daily necessities
- Brown leather shoes
- Knee-length skirts (women)
- Dark socks (men)
- Khaki pants
- Leather winter gloves
- Dark matched suit
- Oxford cloth or polo shirts
- Crisp white or striped collared blouse or shirt
- Silk ties or scarves
- Nude, black, blue hosiery for women (or dress code—no white stockings)
- Trench coat with a liner
- Sweater sets
- Umbrella, black and large enough to cover two people
- Watch with black leather band or metal (gold and silver)

Depending on your professional setting, you may not need all of these items. But even with just a few of these articles of clothing, you have a good place from which to build your professional wardrobe.

When you do go shopping, concentrate on looking for items from this list that you may be missing. Then search for quality-made items that fit you well. It’s good to stick with neutral basics when it comes to big-ticket items like suits or dresses. But feel free to experiment with color and pattern when it comes to shirts and accessories. And remember, anything can be tailored



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to fit your size and shape. There's nothing more confidence-building than clothing that feels as if it's been designed just for you.

From Looking Good to Leading Others

Many organizations recognize that in order to maintain a global presence as a leading brand, their employees are essential in managing the perception of their corporate name. But today, this is difficult for some companies to achieve. Here are some of the key factors why the aesthetic levels in organizations have diminished:

- 39 percent of adults report that they are just "too busy to take care of themselves." (Simmons Market Research, 2005).
- "Every employee must be thoroughly involved in understanding, maintaining and evolving a corporate identity that is of clear benefit to him or her. High expectations equal high results." ("When Leadership Matters," an article by Clare Goldsberry, 2005).
- The U.S. based cultural orientation is individualist. Self-expression is valued in a democratic culture, so as social norms and conventions have diminished, so too have professional standards.
- Mass retail manufacturers respond to six fashion cycles per year. The focus is on trendy designs for a younger demographic. This limits the quality, fit and choice for the figure-changing baby boomer.

- Increased media messaging has confused the consumer with too many business-appropriate and inappropriate choices.

Personal marketing is a subtle aspect of building leadership attributes—but it's a powerful one. If you look like a leader, and conduct yourself professionally, others will treat you with respect and perceive you as a person of authority.

As you hone your personal brand to align with you, there must be an additional consideration. Individuals in organizations need to reach out to clients, vendors, peers and senior managers—there must be a connection to the organization's brand—an unforgettable impression. With the loss of social guidelines, of when to wear what, we find ourselves without the boundaries that once helped us shape our roles. Without these social boundaries and with emergence of numerous global opportunities, the interpretation of how we present ourselves will continue to be shaped by common sense and situation. We can't look to Hollywood celebrities to help us here—we're on our own.

In this world of multi-generations, global diversity and around-the-clock access, there's a growing trend toward individuals as tools. People have become mere exten-

(continued on page 22)

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Image Does Matter: Advancing Your Personal Brand (Part 2) ... • from page 21

sions of their laptops, cell phones or BlackBerries rather than people of self expression and aesthetic. Sometimes technology provides a false sense of anonymity—something we must disregard in a corporate world where a professional image leaves a lasting impression.

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: Missed Part 1 of "Image Does Matter: Advancing Your Personal Brand"? Find it in the October 2007 issue of *The Stepping Stone!*