

Just to be clear...



First impressions count – really!

It's 10:55 a.m. and you have a meeting in 5 minutes in one of the business towers in the financial district. As you open the front door to the business where your meeting is taking place, you glance at the reception desk in front of you. Feeling a sense of shock, you notice that the receptionist is revealing a little too much skin, is chewing bubble gum, and greets you with a "Yes". What's your first impression of the receptionist and, worse yet, of the company?

When you walk into a corporation, no matter how large or small, or where it is located, your first impressions about the company are set. And, those first impressions are instantaneous and unconscious. The way you are greeted, if at all, and the way the person is dressed or even whether they smile, all form the impression you make about the company. Those impressions and

feelings will help you decide if you want to do business with that company.

Today, even though we've adopted a "business casual" style of dressing for work, it is still important to present yourself in a professional way. Business casual doesn't have to mean sloppy. It can be neat and pulled together – golf shirts for men, and blazers and turtlenecks for women are certainly acceptable wear.

Adopting a business casual style can be seen as a positive symbol of an employer's attitude towards meeting employee needs. "Business-casual days" improve morale, increase productivity and even make employees more comfortable. Some companies are using the dress code as an employee benefit and as a way to attract new employees.

It's ironic that casual days began as part of a fund-raising initiative by charities. Employees would buy the privilege to wear casual attire by donating money to a charity. A further impetus for dress-down Fridays came from employers who wanted to improve morale during the late 1980s and early 1990s when employees were being laid off in droves.

Casual days are more than just a passing fad. In fact, casual Fridays have become casual every day. Now employees, in some cases, are having to buy entirely new "business casual" wardrobes.

There are those that would argue that business casual has gone too far and that it actually does more harm to a company than good. In a recent poll by a U.S. employment law firm, 40% of Human Resource managers linked relaxed attire to a laxity in workplace behaviour, 44% noticed an increase in tardiness and absenteeism, and 30% noted a rise in flirting.

What should a business do? How do you decide what is an appropriate style for your company? It's all related to your corporate brand and the image you want your customers and colleagues to have of your company. What type of experience do you want them to have? It is generally agreed that employees who are seen by customers in the course of everyday business should wear business attire. But it is up to the company to clearly define what business attire is or it may be confusing for your staff.

Remember, business attire is only one part of your company's image but a key component of the experience you deliver to your customers. How you provide service, whether your customers can understand your material, and how successful your products are at meeting your customers' needs all contribute to the customer experience. And that experience is either going to keep your customers coming back for more or send them to your competitors.

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Web seminars to be announced soon!