



... Where *Style* Meets Purpose

Corporate Image in a Competitive Marketplace



In today's tough economy, leadership is more challenging than ever. Building a productive and effective company entails setting standards and limits. One item that comes up often is image. The professional image of not just your physical environment, but the image your staff projects as well. Don't underestimate the importance of presenting a professional image at all levels in your company, from CEO to receptionist. Each and every employee makes a statement about your company with how they present themselves to clients and prospects. Even in this economy, it's possible to project an image that promotes confidence and trust in your company:

- 1) Create the environment and image you desire to project by setting clear and simple limits for employee dress. Make sure that all employees understand that they have a stake in your company and its success. The way your employees represent themselves in the workplace or in the field, as it may be, speaks volumes about your company. Customers and potential customers make decisions about who they want to do business with as if they are choosing a partner. They are looking for harmony with the business and signs that both organizations share the same work ethic and dedication to success. If you can convey this, you have a better chance at securing new business.
- 2) Each company is different. Some industries are more casual (i.e., advertising agencies, IT firms, entertainment and creative) and some are still very formal (banking, law, pharmaceutical). IT companies are often very casual work

environments, which means downward limits must be set; casual can be professional without being sloppy or offensive. An advertising agency may want to encourage a more fashion-forward dress code to emphasize their creativity and youthful drive. A financial services firm will want a more conservative dress code, and to caution employees against displaying too much personal wealth to potential clients in this economy. A good image coach can help you determine exactly where your company falls on this spectrum and how to get your staff on board. When employees understand how their personal brand can affect their careers and the company's success, they can begin to take ownership of that image and take pride in it.

- 3) A Business casual policy should be clearly defined whenever instituted. It is widely understood that business casual was created to allow employees the freedom of dressing more casually in the workplace while remaining professional. This means something different for each company. Some places of business see clients infrequently, so managers can relax the dress code with the understanding that when clients are in, staff takes things up a notch to dress more professionally. A software design firm may have a very casual dress code, but a revealing blouse or a tee with an offensive message that has everyone talking hurts productivity and attention to the work at hand. Clothes one would wear to the beach, a baseball game, or a party are not appropriate for even the most casual workplace. Regardless of industry, neatness counts. Whether jeans or a suit, attire should always be clean, wrinkle free, and appropriate for the setting.
- 4) Even companies or divisions with internal rather than external customers benefit from an awareness of image. Departments that dress much more informally than the rest of the company may be subject to envy or derision. A group that dresses formally and displays an abundance of personal wealth may also be a source of envy or discord. Thoughtful attention and a planned "brand image" displayed for even internal customers makes a powerful impact. The right image can smooth interaction between groups working within the same company and helps maintain a sense of corporate unity.
- 5) Additionally, for most companies, it is prudent to downplay extravagance in the workplace. In this economy, it's best to not alienate others with displays of opulence in dress or business environment. A professional image coach can help find the right standards and limits to set in today's economy, especially for companies that require a fine balance. Financial services or luxury goods firms, for example, must find just the right tone between that of projecting success and an ostentatious impression.

The image you and your employees present at work affects your success at a very basic level: A client or potential client looks at everyone he or she comes into contact with and thinks, "Do I want to work with this person? Do I want to work with this company?" Professional impressions by staff and environment can make a client feel comfortable, confident, and welcome. Today, more than ever, every advantage you garner can make the difference in whether you and your company survive or thrive.