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Promotional Apparel

Dressed to Impress

Clothes. Everybody's wearing something. Shirts and jackets, shorts and t-shirts—everyone has to have them. But it's not just necessity that makes clothing a popular tool for marketers—it's the capacity to influence opinions.

According to first impressions research, clothing can make or break you. Within seconds of meeting you, based on a single observed physical trait or behavior, people will assume to know everything about you.¹

"I work in a field that is devoted to assessing people," said Kathryn Ricker, 30, statistician with the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey. Ricker describes what is known to communication-experts as the 'halo effect.'



"That means that if we know certain positive things about a person, we tend to have a generally positive impression of that person, sometimes even in spite of evidence to the contrary. What I'm realizing is that the halo effect also extends to a person's appearance. I think that is why a positive first visual impression is so important. If someone is nicely dressed and looks well put-together, we have greater confidence in his or her abilities even before he or she has said a word."²

Beyond first impressions, a smart dressed team brings enormous marketing value to an organization. Uniforms or coordinating apparel programs provide instant recognition in customer service situations and can enhance perceived credibility. Corporate apparel programs also help create a sense of unity in a group, increasing morale as employees identify with a shared goal.

On the flip side, when it comes to public marketing and incentive efforts, apparel offers an opportunity for multiple exposures that few other promotional products can match. Not only do you get direct contact with the wearer, but he or she becomes a walking advertisement on your behalf.

Remember those first impressions, though. Whether you are implementing a corporate dress program, building brand awareness or using apparel as a sales driver, clothing choices should reflect your culture and goals.



¹ Lindenberg, Judith. "How to make a great first impression." The Lindenberg Group, LLC.
² Ibid.

Uniform advice

Uniforms aren't just for the food service industry. More and more companies—from white collar banks to blue collar trades—are trading in their wear-whatever policies for uniforms or coordinated image-wear.

In 2003, Bank One rolled out a company-wide program that required tellers and other branch workers to wear coordinated dress shirts, sweaters and coats bearing the Bank One logo to work.

"It creates more of a team atmosphere," bank spokesman Jeff Lyttle said in press reports at the time. "It's like wearing team colors."³



Years ago, launching a coordinated clothing program meant few options, including less than snazzy styles, polyester-only textiles and unisex fittings. Today, with expanded fit options in matching palettes, buyers don't have to resign themselves to unisex styling.

A coordinated work wear program can be flexible—offering a variety of mix-and-match options including shirts, sweaters, vests, jackets, dresses, pants, scarves and ties that all work together and still portray the image of a unified team. Less formal programs offer a small selection of coordinating shirts which employees can pair with their own slacks.

Whatever uniform or image-wear style you use, be sure it aligns with your brand image. The uniform is one of the best tools you have to communicate a brand. White oxford shirts with loose jeans say young and hip, polos and khakis say conservative but casual, while navy dresses and corporate blues say formal and professional.



Think about what a restaurant apron alone can convey—a white, shin-length apron tied at the waist suggests upscale, innovative cuisine while a short, red change apron is more at home in local, neighborhood eateries.

Rick Segal, author of *Retail Business Kit for Dummies*, offers another piece of advice for companies considering uniforms: think hip. If the uniform is cool enough, it can turn into a revenue stream, prompting patrons to buy copies for their own casual wear.⁴ Trendy uniforms can also be an ally in staff recruitment efforts, eliminating any stigma associated with having a required outfit and converting a "have-to-wear" item into a "want-to-wear" signature piece.

³ Coyne, Eileen. "Bank One Branch Workers to Wear Uniforms," *Dayton Business Journal*, June 6, 2003.

⁴ Moran, Gwen. "A Clothes Call," *Entrepreneur*, March 2004.

Beyond your brand, be sure your uniform is functional for each employee role. Remember to offer seasonal options so that employees can be comfortable in changing weather. And consider performance fabrics, like Teflon-treated stain resistant shirts, that will extend the life of your uniforms and provide the greatest value.

At home promotional apparel ideas

Promotional apparel has value beyond public exposure. A gift your customer will use only around the home can be just as valuable.

Know your market. High-end consumers may never wear an apparel item bearing your logo out in public. But home luxury gifts like robes and slippers can serve as a constant brand reminder in your customer's home.

Likewise, aprons have broad market appeal and utility. New print styles add attraction beyond traditional primary colors and high-function aprons with specialty pockets for grilling tools and garden supplies provide added benefits.

Dress codes

It isn't just because of branding that uniforms are seeing a comeback. Jackson Lewis, a law firm that specializes in personnel issues, polled more than 1000 human resource executives who implemented a dress down policy. They reported a thirty percent increase in flirtatious behavior, contributing to an increase in sexual harassment lawsuits.⁵

Corporate image-wear can provide employees with the comfortable feel of casual clothes, without jeopardizing a professional atmosphere.

Pundits trace the rise of business casual to the dot-com boom of the late 1990s. IT workers in Silicon Valley purportedly started the relaxed dress trend, which spread across the U.S.

"It was thought that if you dressed formally, you weren't one of the privileged ones in the technology world," notes Sherry Maysonave, an image consultant based in Texas and author of the book, *Casual Power*.⁶

At the same time, technology was enabling virtual workplaces, and people needed fewer face-to-face meetings to get things done. As off-site meetings declined, so too did requirements for jackets and suits.

Maysonave, also suggests that the move to casual workplaces was the result of purposeful lobbying, as jean and other casual-wear manufacturers worked their influence on human resource departments, arguing that comfortable attire in the workplace improved morale and productivity.⁷



⁵ Lindenberger, Judith. "How to make a great first impression." *The Lindenberger Group, LLC*.

⁶ Shelton, Jim. "Sunday Best Gives Way to Dressing Down," *New Haven Register*. June 22, 2008.

⁷ *Ibid*.

Ten years later, with corporate casual policies firmly entrenched, younger professionals are likely to make the same arguments.

“Getting up in the morning and putting on a suit is hard,” says Sara Shikhman, a 26-year-old legal associate at Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft LLP in New York. She says she hasn’t worn one in six months and that if she did wear one, her peers would think she had a job interview.⁸

Sweaters: Another office option

Sweaters are an oft forgotten opportunity for promotional apparel. Easy to dress up or down, sweaters provide a subtle yet classic way to promote your brand for corporate casual Fridays, marketing events, and company outings

When advising employees on appropriate dress, human resource experts recommend written policies or guidelines to avoid miscommunication or inconsistent enforcement. But, says Bonnie Beirne, director of service operations for Administaff Inc., a Houston-based company that provides human-resource outsourcing, just because you don’t have something in writing, that shouldn’t stop you from issuing a verbal directive.

Beirne tells employers to couch clothing requests as a branding issue, explaining that how an employee dresses conveys a message to customer and vendors.⁹

Case in point: Wearing pride on their sleeves

When instructor Jim Elkins began requiring the students of North Technical High School’s Cisco Networking Academy to wear professional, collared shirts during class time, he never could have predicted its impact.

The Florissant, Mo., Academy, highlighted by Cisco for its innovative teaching techniques, allows high school students to earn a total of 25 college credits during their junior and senior year by completing a series of honors technical courses. For 2.5 hours each day, Elkins requires each student to wear a logo’d polo shirt during class, as a means of preparing them professionally for success, as well as academically.

“After my class is over, many students continue to wear their professional polos to English, math and so on. They want everyone to realize their successes and, in turn, they’re treated with more respect from their peers and teachers,” said Elkins. “The shirts definitely spark a social pride inside of each student.”



⁸ Binkly, Christina. “Law Without Suits: New Hires Flout Tradition,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2008.

⁹ Rosenberg, Joyce. “Dress Code Bodes Well for Company Image,” *The Associated Press*, June 22, 2008.

If your company does offer image wear, consider providing guidelines on what employees should and should not wear with the company logo. And in companies where image wear is considered part of a uniform, rules may limit whether employees can wear logo'd items off the job. Either way, it doesn't hurt to remind employees that while they are wearing your brand, they are seen as representatives of the organization and should govern their actions and activities accordingly.

Overall, corporate dress policies should beware of discrimination issues. Not that long ago women in many offices were still required to wear skirts to work. Today, the generally accepted view is that requiring skirts is only acceptable when part of a company uniform. Other gendered policies, like prohibiting men from wearing earrings or banning facial hair, are best discussed with legal council.

Incentives and giveaways

Beyond employee image wear programs, apparel remains an ongoing favorite for sales incentives and giveaways. From the ever-popular t-shirt launcher at your local sports arena to the stock of logo'd hats in a salesperson's trunk, apparel is a perennially welcome incentive.

Notably though, the gap between promotional clothing and fashion has closed. Consumers are more discerning about what they wear, and the stakes for promotional programs have increased accordingly. For a giveaway to have lasting value, it must have some relevance to contemporary fashion.

Increasingly, what that means is that marketers are buying in smaller quantities and offering a range of styles and fits. It's not just about offering women customized sizes anymore. Even the men want more style options.

In a practical sense, that means looking beyond the standard t-shirt to more stylized versions with slimmer fits, sportier sleeve lengths and alternate neck lines. Retro-style raglan sleeves and ringer t-shirts are popular, as are rugby-inspired designs.

This fashion trend also means companies are shrinking their logos and opting for less obtrusive locations like the shirt sleeve or hip-level on the lower shirt-tail.

Colors too are following trends as combinations of pink and brown are popular with the ladies while sporty oranges are a favorite among many youth. For brand coordinated



colors themes, marketers are choosing more muted shades with subtle notes of brand color in the logo or trim rather than solid corporate-color t-shirts.

Unique promotional apparel ideas

While the t-shirt will probably always reign supreme, promotional apparel now offers more far options. Suppliers today are branching out into footwear, children's clothes, bathrobes and more.

With these new options, marketers are creating innovative new incentive programs that are a better match for their brand and their industry. Spas, for example, can now give away fleece slippers when clients book multi-service sessions while snowmobile dealers might offer knit caps just for walking in the door.

Get it right, and you'll benefit from countless exposures and repeated wear-time. Get it wrong, and your promotion will be relegated to obscurity at the bottom of the closet or worse—the rag bin.

Let's look at one organization that did get it right!

Case in point: As good as gold

It's no secret at Newton County Senior Services in Covington, Ga. what the hot item is among its 60- to 89-year-old seniors: bright gold t-shirts.

These vividly colored garments are awarded to participants in the NCSS Monday Walking Club once they reach their personal 20-mile mark. Each member also receives a pedometer after attending the club's first meeting.

The walking club incentives were made possible by an in-kind donation through 4imprint's one by one charitable program. And, according to Freda Reed, Activities Coordinator at NCSS, the gold t-shirts have served their purpose ten-fold as both an incentive and a lead generator.

"Everyone sees the bright gold t-shirts and starts asking 'Where did you get that from?' And, 'How can we join?'" said Freda. "It really has helped recruitment. Then, once they're in, they bring another friend ... and another!"

In total, the 70-member group has garnered over 20,000 miles and sees no distance cap in sight anytime soon.



Sport accessories instead of t-shirts

Sporting accessories present an innovative new way to get your logo out on a product people will wear again and again.

Retro-style wristbands are gaining popularity again—particularly among younger players—while sport socks are useful for anyone who's active

Keep tabs on what your market is wearing and watch for trends at other retailers. Peruse the team store or the Web site of professional sports teams as these buyers must keep track of what's hot and current in both sports and corporate wear.



Five trends marketers should watch for

Like expanded fit options and fashion-forward designs, other innovations in fabric and accessories are boosting the impact of apparel programs:

1. **Functional fabrics.** Performance fabrics is one of the fastest growing segments of the clothing industry, and those high-function options are available in logo'd apparel.

Among the highest demand are moisture-wicking fabrics and items that are stain- and/or wrinkle-resistant. These performance items are available in a wide variety of polo and oxford styles perfect for seamless transitions from office to golf course and back again.

Likewise, high visibility reflective shirts and tops with UV-protection are other function-added items which appeal to sports enthusiasts. Anti-microbial options are also available and are ideal for sporting activities and employees who work extended shifts.

Winter accessories

For cold weather climates, winter accessories like ski caps, headbands, scarves and gloves are sought after premiums.

2. **Co-branding.** As fashion styles grow, so too have the number of co-branded options available on the market. Branded names like Columbia, Nike, and Greg Norman add higher perceived value to the garment and provide positive association with your own brand.



- Eco fabrics.** Eco fabrics have hit the mainstream market and are now affordable in large quantities for promotional programs. Organic cotton leads the trend, and buyers will find that most apparel items—from baby rompers to caps and tees—are now available in organic versions.

Baby clothes

Another recent innovation in promotional apparel is the new options in children's wear. Babies can go through several outfits in a day, so new parents can get a lot of use out of logo'd items like onesies, crawlers and bibs.

Remember to keep the logo small and color choices tasteful, as parents can be just as discriminating about baby clothes as their own.



Other earthy-friendly clothing options include fabrics made from recycled material, bamboo and soybeans. No matter what the reason, offering sustainable promotions is a way to do well and do some good for the environment at the same time.

- Protective clothing.** Protective apparel offers dual opportunity to reinforce your company brand and meet company safety goals. By providing logo'd gear to their staff, companies increase the likelihood that employees will actually use protective apparel.

According to Occupational Hazards magazine, hot trends include multi-function fabrics that offer flame retardency, anti-static properties and chemical resistance.¹⁰ Logo'd safety products like glasses and hard hats are also ideal for use when visitors tour the job site or shop floor.

- Advanced accessorizing techniques.** Multi-head, computerized embroidery machines can now accommodate complex logo designs with detail and clarity. Another relatively recent innovation is digital imprinting as an alternative to screen printing. Digital printing offers affordable full color production and can be an economic brand booster when used in smaller runs.

For the feet

For years, footwear was excluded from promotional programs. But now, buyers can choose from a wide selection of flip flops and clogs. Footwear comes in three sizes—women's, men's, and a youth version.

The right item can pay dividends. Whether your goal is increased sales, better customer service, team building or fundraising ... apparel provides multiple ways to build your brand.

¹⁰ Keating, Michael. "What's Favorable and Fitting in Workwear and Protective Clothing," *Occupational Hazards*, June 2008.