

Making the right wardrobe choices can improve image, increase sales

Alan Buhler

Contributing writer

What impression do you send visually? Is it inspiring, striking or extraordinary?

Dawn Waldrop, president of Best Impressions, says: "Your image is a representation of who you are and how you wish others to see you. Your overall appearance creates an impression."

Ms. Waldrop goes on to say, "Successful professionals have mastered the skill to influence through their presence. From the moment they walk in the door you can feel their power to influence by their choice of attire, their attention to fine details, and an overall, well put together, look."

Research has shown that an impressive image through the choice of proper attire and accessories has the power to influence. Influence can create change in others' behavior, attitudes and beliefs, and has the power to move people in positive directions. A number of studies report that people who have mastered an impressive image receive more help, are better liked and are perceived as more persuasive and as having greater intellectual capacities.

It is important for salespeople to command respect, inspire credibility and create trust. Your clothes speak volumes about you, your company and your work ethics.

What you wear creates the first impression of who you are and what you offer. People buy from people they like, and they like people who are like themselves. Therefore, it is imperative that you dress for your customer. How do you think your customer is likely to feel if you show up wearing shorts, a T-shirt and a pair of old sandals? And no matter who the customer is, it is downright unprofessional to show too much skin, leg, chest hair, or suggestive tattoos.

To most of you, this advice is obvious. But think about it, how often have you been taken aback by the appearance of someone waiting on you?

Maybe it's a salesperson knocking on your door, or simply "dropping" by your office? Unfortunately, the appearance, personal grooming and overall image of some companies' employees are far less than professional. What you wear and how you look is the first message received by your customers.

While corporate environments may be more relaxed today, only certain casual clothes will set you a cut above the rest. It may not be necessary to start your day in a business suit, but understanding your customer's corporate culture will dictate the proper attire for your interactions with them. With that said, a wide range of styles may be appropriate for your sales wardrobe.

Cold calling, prospecting and sales research is tough work. It is also appropriate to perform these functions in comfortable clothes. However, if you perform these functions in an office environment, you will need to keep a jacket and tie (or scarf) on hand for impromptu client meetings. This goes for men and women. It goes without saying that slacks (or appropriate skirt) are a must, and tennis shoes simply won't work.

One of the keys to winning sales and closing more business is exuding the best nonverbal communication signals with proper attire. For both men and women, jackets are especially important. Where it is not necessary to wear a tie, always wear a jacket to your sales meetings. It helps give the prospective client a good first impression when making your presentation.

Selling is a competitive profession, and as a professional salesperson you want to have every possible advantage. Studies have shown that wearing a jacket during a sales presentation helps increase the prospect's perception of the salesperson as an authority in their field. As the presentation continues, you can remove the jacket to increase bonding with a less formal audience.

No matter what you wear, you must exude a crisp, well-pressed image. Shirts, pants, and skirts must always be starched and ironed, or professionally dry-cleaned. Don't let wrinkled or stained clothes distract from your message.

Make sure your attire says to your audience, "I am someone you can trust and do business with." Always keep a spare white shirt available in the event of dribbled tea, spilled coffee, or splattered sauce. This misfortune usually seems to present itself just before an important sales presentation. A white shirt will undoubtedly match anything you are wearing and provides a quick change opportunity.

For both men and women, good grooming also projects a professional image. Make sure your hair is clean, dry and styled, and your nails are clean and manicured. Women should be careful not to overdo their make-up and jewelry. Big, clanking accessories can be distracting. Accessories should finish and polish your look. Ultimately, the goal is not to detract or distract from your message.

"Step into your closet and inventory each article of clothing you wear in your job," says Ms. Waldrop, " and when you shop, give serious consideration to each piece of attire and accessory you purchase to ensure it makes a visually professional statement. It must create an image that says you are a specialized expert, skilled, trained and qualified."

In the end, the most important factor to consider is to dress appropriately for your particular clients.

If your sales calls take you to construction sites full of dirt, or to dairy farms deep in mud, then by all means wear blue jeans, boots, and a knit shirt with your company logo. If your clients are financial institutions, then I strongly suggest wearing a suit. Make a point to know your competitor, and how he or she dresses. Always dress one level above that of your competitor.

Another guide to consider is to attempt to dress as if you are a senior executive within your typical client's firm. With all this in mind, don't forget to be yourself. Stand tall with your shoulders back. Make your professional image a tool that will give you the winning edge.

ALAN BUHLER is a Georgetown-based motivational keynote speaker, business development coach, author and sales trainer. He can be reached at (512) 630-6578 or (alan@salesresearch.net).