

A man in a blue shirt and tie stands in the foreground with his arms crossed, looking directly at the camera. In the background, two other men in similar attire are visible, slightly out of focus. The setting is a modern office hallway with curved architectural elements.

WHY DRESS CODES *DON'T* WORK

WRITTEN BY JOANNE PITTMAN



One of the leading issues that we face today when meeting with our corporate clientele is an overwhelming frustration regarding Dress Codes in the workplace. As part of our service, we first meet with the HR directors, CEO's and or business owners.

Our objective in this meeting is to find out what the message of the company is and how we may be able to help improve the overall corporate image. One important corporate aspect that we address is the image of the workforce. If there is a 'disconnect' between the overall image of the employees and the company message, we create custom solutions designed to bring the divided messages into harmony.

As you can imagine, how a company's employees dress and groom themselves can greatly impact a business's brand. Therefore, many companies spend precious time, money and effort on creating a Dress Code. Sounds like a good solution, right? So why is creating and discussing the Dress Code such a difficult thing to do? I have not met anyone to date that enjoys discussing this subject matter.

How is it that there is a very clear and easy to understand Dress Code and employees still come to work looking inappropriate, or worse, they might be abiding by the Dress Code, technically speaking, but they still do not have the look that you had in mind. Now what?

Based upon my experience with businesses and with individuals over the past 23 years, I have gathered information which I am writing about in my new book, "Why Dress Codes Don't Work". I have decided to give you a sneak preview and share some key points that we regularly address with our clientele.

WHAT WERE THEY THINKING?

1. You do understand that Dress Codes mean MONEY, right? So please keep in mind that in reality you are telling your employees this: They are taking a pay cut! They will do whatever they can to hold on to their wallets. Wouldn't you?

2. Just who is making the Dress Code? Isn't it usually upper management? You are the rich ones in the company right? Easy for you to say: Dress Code. You have the big bucks.

3. "We poor folk, we poor lower payroll employees... we are just scraping by and now you tell us there is a new Dress Code."

You devise a plan to roll out the Dress Code. You will have a personal shopper from a department store and maybe a custom clothier (who are hoping to sell your employees clothing), come talk to the group for free. They will show your employees all of the latest and greatest things to wear for work. They will show them how to mix and match. You will have a nice fashion show. What an amazingly productive use of your company time. Not. (yet). I will explain the (yet) part later. I know you want me to tell you now, but if I do, you won't get it (yet). (Thought: have you ever had "free services" successfully solve your most important business issues?)

Allow me to suggest what might be happening in the heads of your employees while they are watching the "fashion show". These suggestions are based on actual interviews with employees just like yours. They are based upon my 23 years of experience working with men and women that need clothes and do not particularly like needing to buy them. Many



of the people I have worked with are moderately wealthy. So please imagine what your not-so-wealthy employees are thinking.

- “Wow, that is a great outfit! I bet it does not come in my size. (De pressed. Imagine how the rest of their work day will go.)
- “I sure wish that I could afford that. My boss should give me a raise. However, I would not really use my new money to buy work clothes, yuck! I would go on vacation or pay some bills.”
- “If I spend my money on new work clothing, then I won’t have enough money for my son’s football dues.”
- “This is a waste of my time. I am not going to buy any of that stuff any way. I can’t afford that!” (arms TIGHTLY folded)
- “I can’t wait to go get that new outfit! Maybe they will give me some extra time off of work so I can go shopping, because I am way too busy on my usual days off.”
- “Do I really look that bad? I don’t even know where to start. It is so overwhelming.” (Hint, overwhelm is NOT conducive to creative thinking, or problem solving.)
- “I hate having to buy clothes that are not my style!”

Are you getting the idea?

AFTER THE FASHION SHOW.

You arrive at the office with great anticipation; “Mary Lou really liked that navy blue suit. I can’t wait to see her in it”, you think to yourself as you walk into the office. There is Mary Lou. She is wearing the “black widow”

outfit she always wears. You think to yourself, because you know the fashion show was a huge success and everyone loved it, “She must be saving her new outfit for tomorrow or maybe it needed to be altered.”

Please allow me to share some more synonyms that go with “Dress Code”. You remember PAY CUT. Here are a few more:

- Overwhelming
- Confusing (yeah, I know it is clear and simple to understand)
- Distressing/Stressful (as if they were not already stressed enough getting ready for work)
- Costly (which is separate from, yet is compounded by PAY CUT)
- Drain on their time (their personal time...)

May I be so bold as to suggest that perhaps the Dress Code is not the panacea which will solve the image needs at your company?

So what can be done? May I suggest that you look at your employees as human beings and individuals that have complicated lifestyles and needs?

Understanding the real issues that are driving the image ‘disconnect’ may be more important, effective and a better return on investment than having the perfect Dress Code or a great fashion show.

Reconsider the purpose of the Dress Code. What if the Dress Code was not a tool used for compliance but was used as an invaluable support system carefully designed to help your employees grow as human beings?

What would it look like at your place of business if each of your employees, male and female, loved getting dressed for work? What would it feel like as an executive to never have to think about or worry about what your employees were wearing or how they were groomed when in front of your key clients or prospects?

Now, I am going to say something that might get me into trouble. So please bear with me for a moment. Have you ever wondered what impact your employees' attire is making when they are off of the clock and not held to the company standards of dress and grooming? Please don't throw the tomatoes at me, (yet).

Have you ever been somewhere meeting new people, on your social time, and have them ask you what you do for work?- Almost without fail, right? How many sales people does your company have? Here is the answer, answered by another question: How many people do you have in your company. This is how many sales people you have working for you or against you. Therefore I submit that any communication about your company by any employee on their 'off' time matters to your business just as much as it does on their 'on' time.

HERE IS THE (YET) PART:

Before you discuss the Dress Code and compliance and what is appropriate to wear to work, we suggest that you first consider trying the following:

1. Build a culture and environment in which your employees feel valued, appreciated and understood.

2. Have a team building experience which opens up a dialogue with your employees that helps you understand where they are coming from and how you may be able to assist them with their personal growth, and PAY for it. Your small investment will return large dividends.

3. Create opportunities for the employees to openly discuss their image needs and concerns with trained outside image professionals without fear of rejection or disciplinary measures.

4. Create benefits and incentives for your employees that lead to self-improvement.

5. Invite an atmosphere of learning that engages them and helps them to think and see things in a new light. I suggest that offering a new insight and opportunity for paradigm shifts is much more conducive to voluntary change than watching a fashion show.

6. Once a true interest in change is created in the culture, implement opportunities (on company time) for your employees to explore new options in their attire. They will be open and ready for this when it is presented with their interest first and the company's interest second.

Most importantly, your employees will come from a place of authenticity on and off of the clock, which is much more attractive and rapport building than simple Dress Code compliance. ●

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