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Employee dress code: A resurgence

Recently, while shopping at a local grocery store, I noticed a poster on the wall that related the company's dress code. Not only did it tell the whys and wherefores, it illustrated each employee's position with a description of the appropriate attire. How interesting, I thought at the time.

Based on studies and company experiences during the past few years, organizations are beginning to recognize, again, the power of image, and the fact that an employee's individual image can either serve as an effective reflection of the company's public image or undermine it. So, the workplace is beginning to experience the resurgence of dress codes as a means to help enhance the professional image of employees. This is true for the sales force representing the company in the field as well as the staff behind the scenes.

Organizations that have been, to this point, unconcerned with the image of their employees need to be particularly concerned with it now. Our transient, global society means rapidly changing markets, audiences, ideas, opinions and leaders. Reliance on an established clientele or sphere of influence is no longer practical. In many industries, the competition is becoming more aware of image. So, it may be time to rethink things.

Although most dress codes in the workplace are implied rather than written, the message is nonetheless crystal clear: Wear what's appropriate to your job, whether it's on the shop floor or in the corporate boardroom. The challenge for many managers as well as employees is to determine what's appropriate, thus the perceived need for a policy that

addresses this issue.

For managers preparing to develop or revise and refine a company dress code, the following suggestions are encouraged:

1. Explain "why." Discuss the importance of professional image. Of course, the bottom line is that our appearance says a great deal about us. We are reflections of our organization, and it would behoove each of us to take pride in our appearance — and our company — by dressing appropriately.

In addition, in formulating a dress code, policies are more likely to be accepted if employees have a genuine say in creating/revising them. Of course, one of the main ingredients here is management's overall support, setting the tone and enforcing the policy.

Another key ingredient in this section is communication. In order for any company policy to be adhered to, the information must be communicated to all involved. An ideal time for informing new employees about your company's dress code would be during orientation sessions. Current employees can be informed about changes during staff meetings or performance review periods. In all cases, a follow-up should be handled in memo form or written in an employee handbook.

2. Explain "dos and don'ts." While it might be a bit rigid to dictate exactly what employees should wear, guidelines should be given. A statement should accompany the dress code that points out that a professional image is best projected by attire and grooming that puts forth the image the company wants to present. Prior to identifying

the dos and don'ts, including grooming guidelines, an introductory statement should be included. In specific professions, a statement should also be made that all applicable federal and state safety and health laws pertaining to dress and grooming shall be observed. Following these initial statements, the dos and don'ts should be listed.

3. Consider legalities. When it comes to dress policies, there are legal issues to consider. Employers who enforce dress codes on women only risk gender-based discrimination claims. In addition, organizations also can get into trouble for taking steps such as banning styles that are worn as part of religious beliefs. Simply keep in mind that employers can legally enforce dress and grooming requirements as long as they are not discriminatory. And, interestingly enough, courts are giving employers leeway. Be sure to check with your legal department when developing a dress policy.

4. Enforce the policy. If the dress code is properly communicated, and management is supportive and sets the tone, there will be little room for violators. For those employees who choose to violate the policy, a progressive enforcement procedure is suggested.

The bottom line is that the dress, grooming and behavior of employees have a definite influence on customers, the working environment and the overall efficiency/effectiveness of the organization, and professionalism is a key ingredient.

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