

Resolve to Present a Professional Image

As an Atlanta-based image consultant, I'm often asked, "Does what I wear really matter?" The answer is a resounding "Yes!" As a wave of "business casual" crashes through the corporate world, there are many industries where casual can send negative vibes—so, as an entrepreneur or a consultant, do not take chances. Trends may change, products may change, regulations may change, but one thing remains constant: Customers are won and lost based on the degree of trust they perceive—and place—in the people with whom they do business. And trust begins with looking trustworthy.

Twenty-five years in the corporate world have demonstrated to me that impressive credentials are important, but don't necessarily represent the part of the equation that wins over clients. The most successful individuals, the ones who really excel in their field, possess more than an impressive resume; they exhibit a manner of communication and a style of dress that sends a clear message of credibility, professionalism and competence. They don't have to say, "Trust me." It's understood at the outset, from the initial point of contact.

What does your look say about you?

Studies conducted by Harvard University show it takes only 7-20 seconds for someone to make an assessment of your educational level, economic status and social standing based simply on the way you look – you may not get a second chance to make a great first impression!

Reflect a careless approach in your work attire and people may perceive you as someone who will take a careless approach to their business. Take the time to polish your look and reflect a professional image, however, and you're likely to realize significant dividends, not only in terms of the way you feel about yourself, but also in terms of the way others feel about you and your level of commitment and competence. You have the power to change the perception that other people have of you—exercise that power!

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What does your style of communication say about you?

Verbal and non-verbal communication are an important part of the image you reflect too. Your smile, the eye contact you make (or don't make), your handshake, your posture—all send a message about your credibility and your professionalism. Do you smile, extend your hand and keep eye contact when a prospective customer approaches you? Do you give your full attention to what they say? These behaviors tell the customer that you care and that you value their business. Practice them consistently and your customer base will surge!

Whether at a networking meeting or a social event, when someone enters a room, they scan the room for a friendly face, for someone with whom they may have something in common. Be that friendly face. Reflect a style that says, "I'm approachable, I'm here to help," and you may win a customer or a friend for life. And be sure to extend your positive communication style to the technology you use. Practice engaging "techno-etiquette" when it comes to your e-mail, voicemail and conversations you have via telephone.

Reflect an image that is memorable!

In a culture that increasingly accepts "good enough," be the one that stands apart. Sending a positive image through the clothes you wear, the words you say and the body language you reflect will attract prospective customers and turn them into loyal customers. Remember, when you look your best, you can be your best!

Peggy Parks is President of The Parks Image Group, an Atlanta-based company providing personal and professional image consulting, career coaching and corporate workshops.

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