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DRESS THE PART...IMAGE COUNTS

By Diane Hudson Burns, CPRW

How often have you heard the cliché 'Dress for Success'? Well, in the business market it should be taken seriously. Image counts heavily in an interview setting and daily on the job. Performance is highly important and is 'sold' on a superior resume prompting a call from a hiring manager for an interview. Step two is image and attitude at the interview. The purpose of the interview is to determine if the candidate 'fits' in with the hiring authority and the department. Does the image presented by the candidate reflect the resume and accomplishments? Does the image presented by the candidate exude a positive, authoritative, and professional attitude? These are questions the hiring authority will be 'looking' at the candidate.

Case Study

A candidate at a national S&L was applying for a position in the corporate communications department. He had all the right credentials, a superior resume, and the required master's degree, but he attended the interviews in a tweed sports coat with suede patches on the elbow (you know the type) and corduroy pants. Also, he had a beard. He was invited back a second time to meet with the executive vice president of the department...again he wore a sports coat and corduroy pants. He was invited back a third time and told, "We would like to hire you, but we are concerned about your professional attire...or lack thereof. We require that you wear suits in this job." The hiring authority also requested that he shave the beard. The candidate was willing to invest an initial \$1,000 in three or four new suits and ties and signed a contract agreeing to wear a suit and tie to work everyday. He was lucky. His qualifications were so outstanding that the hiring authority gave him the opportunity to change his appearance. He was willing and received the job.

The hiring authority is perfectly within its right to request a polished and professional appearance by its employees, as the employees at the corporate level would be interacting often with other corporate offices, organizations, and representing the S&L in public settings. The corporate level employees would receive frequent exposure to other executives as well as subordinate offices. An employee must look and act the part to be fully qualified for a position.

Military Example

A military member preparing for his first civilian employment interview (after he sent his resume and was called for an interview based upon his accomplishments) told me his wife bought him a leather jacket and matching slacks for the interview. He was a senior level manager seeking employment as a logistician with a major corporation. I strongly recommended that he wear a suit to the interview and tell his wife that he would be pleased to wear the new outfit with her on a Saturday night date. He wore a suit to the interview and received an offer of employment.

Body Jewelry

Ms. Jones, a bank loan representative found herself 'out-placed'. As I finished her resume, she asked me to be honest about her appearance: she had two large nose rings, several ear pierced rings on each ear, and fingernails each four inches long with her pinkie nails curled back around. Each nail was painted a different bright color with nail pierced rings...if there is such a thing. I told her to get rid of the nose rings, cut the nails to a suitable one-half inch length and use clear or light nail polish, and get rid of all but one earring in each ear. She also had a ring on each finger and wore several bracelets and necklaces. Underneath the heavy jewelry was a very attractive lady and evidently she had excellent skills in the industry. She just needed to have someone tell her quite plainly to use a professional appearance in order to retain professional employment.

Which Tie?

One client was preparing for his interview and purchased a new navy suit. He brought two ties to my office to ask which was the most appropriate. One was blue paisley the other was red. We chose the red tie and used the adage "power suit"- navy suit, white shirt and red tie. He was offered employment. Again, impressions count. Obviously a person is not hired solely on the clothes they wear, but also on their qualifications. However, if the qualifications on the resume are outstanding enough to obtain an interview and the appearance presented at the interview is poor-the hiring authority will call the next candidate on the list.

Dress the Part

"Dress for Success" is relative to "Dress the Part". If for example, Ms. Jones were applying as a model or to work in a hard rock music environment, then her appearance would have been appropriate. But she was seeking employment having daily visibility by clients from the public. She was to represent a conservative banking facility.

If a truck driver is attending an employment interview-he should dress appropriately for the job for which he is seeking. A short sleeved shirt, tie and slacks or a knit shirt and slacks may be quite appropriate.

I recently attended a networking meeting sponsored by McCarthy & Company, a nationally recognized firm providing career transition assistance to individuals and corporations, headquartered in Virginia. Mr. McCarthy recommends two tailor made suits for men and two Nordstrom suits for women for the interview process. Of course, when you get the job, the suits will come in handy for daily employment. Dress each day as if you were expecting to run into and chat with the president of the company. The attendees at this networking meeting were mostly in suits with handkerchiefs in the breast pocket, cufflinks, and tie bars. Most clients were slim and poised. But it is all a process of learning what is appropriate and what is not appropriate and of slowly upgrading or changing one's wardrobe in preparation for the employment process. First impressions are lasting impressions.

The Wardrobes

There is a new term abounding in the employment world, "third wardrobe"- for men, as opposed to a tailored wardrobe for the office and casual wear for the weekends. Many companies have implemented relaxed dress codes on Fridays or for other special occasions, which includes a sports coat, knit shirts and casual slacks. However, I know of clients who got caught off guard in a Polo shirt and Dockers, on a Friday, and had to attend a last minute meeting-the others in attendance at the meeting were in suits and ties. I recommend that clients keep a spare tie and coat in the office or the car for just such an occasion. Oh, and the boss still likes to see a crease in the slacks...blue jeans with holes are not appropriate for casual day, unless the office is enjoying a picnic at the park. Remember-it's the impression that counts.

Basics in image include proper grooming (use of deodorant, trimmed nails, washed and brushed hair, brushed teeth, and mouthwash, if necessary). Don't chew gum, smoke, drink alcoholic beverages, or eat or drink right before an interview. You might spill coffee on your suit while you are in the lobby waiting for the interview to begin. Shoes should be polished and clean-tie shoes for men and closed pumps for ladies. Belts and shoes should match (for women and men). Socks should match the color of the pants and ladies should wear neutral color hose (carry an extra pair in the car in case of runs). I recently read a blurb (author unknown) in a magazine that stated freshly cut or trimmed hair makes an impression on the hiring authority, because at least the hair is neat.

Jewelry should be kept to a minimum-a watch and wedding ring are appropriate. Men can wear a tie bar and cuff links. Women can wear small earrings and/or an appropriate necklace. Facial hair is highly discouraged for executive interviews and makeup for women should be kept to a minimum using natural tones.

Prior to the interview look in the mirror. See if there are any food pieces stuck in your teeth, use a breath mint or spray, fix any upturned collars or undone buttons. If you see anything you don't like, change it. Project an image of importance and seriousness-as a team player with a positive disposition. Make a lasting first impression with the composure you exude as you initially greet a hiring authority-just by what you are wearing.

Summary

A hiring authority is looking to answer questions about a candidate that are never spoken: Can this person work in my department? Is this person well groomed? Does this person know how to dress the part? Does this person have any quirks that will not be compatible with this department?-and the hiring authority can answer many of these question just by meeting the candidate and looking at his/her appearance and image.