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Does Image Matter?

*You bet it does. A survey by Sales & Marketing Management Magazine reveals how reps who don't look - or act- the part of a professional can wreak havoc with the bottom line. Read this and you'll rethink the business casual trend that's invading your office. By **Melinda Ligos***

As soon Lawrence Mandel entered the office of his new reospect, he realized he'd made a big mistake. "Just get back from the links?" the prospective client asked.

Mandel, a sales exec who works for a financial services firm in the Pacific Northwest, cringed as he glanced down at his pale yellow golf shirt and khaki pants.

"Uh-we're business casual in our office," he recalls telling the prospect, who was wearing a navy blue suit and paisley tie. Mandel spent the next 30 minutes stumbling through his presentation, his confidence deflated, as the prospect tapped his heel and continuously glanced at his watch. Needless to say, he didn't get the business.

"I lost all credibility by not coming in there in a suit," says the regional sales manager, who has taken to dressing conservatively on all sales calls since the incident occurred about two years ago. "This guy wasn't looking to buy something from some chump in a short-sleeved shirt. I totally projected the wrong image."

Was Mandel's client being overly superficial? Maybe. But even in this age of customer relationships, where what a sales executive says is ostensibly more important than how he or she looks, image still matters-in a big way.

In an exclusive S&MM survey of 651 executives, an overwhelming majority said they would avoid hiring sales reps who were sloppily or unfashionably dressed, or those who had visible body piercings or tattoos. More than half said overweight or unattractive sales reps have a tougher time making sales.

In another recent survey of consumers, conducted by researchers at the University of Montreal, 48 percent of the respondents said they had negative perceptions of salespeople who drove unappealing cars.

"Let's face it: Humans are very visual beings," says Dawn Waldrop, a Cleveland-based consultant who teaches executives how to dress. "If you walk in the door and don't look your best, your client may not get past that, no matter how great your presentation is."

The problem, say Waldrop and other workplace experts, is that even though sales managers know how important image is, many don't give the right guidance to their salespeople-or don't know how to handle those who have an image problem, be it a bad haircut, an infatuation with polyester suits, or a tendency to use salty language.

"These are very personal issues," says Bill Brooks, CEO of The Brooks Group, a sales training and consulting firm in Greensboro, North Carolina. "Most managers don't want to confront people on this kind of stuff." But that's a mistake he adds.

"Sales reps who don't project a professionai image are saying to a client, 'I have no right to be here.' They can have great product knowledge and great selling skills, but it won't matter. They won't have credibility-and that

will cost your company."

The first step to helping reps put their best foot forward, says Brooks, is to set guidelines on what's acceptable.

Clothes Make the Man (and Woman)

Got a rep who thinks business casual means a two-day beard and faded jeans? Don't blame him: Blame today's ultra-confusing fashion climate. "Casual dress means a variety of different things to a variety of different people," says Lauren Solomon, a New York-based image consultant. "And very few managers have taken the responsibility to really show employees what casual means in their industry."

In fact, Solomon adds, very few sales managers give any fashion guidance to reps at all. Such lack of direction can be dangerous. One sales manager in the technology industry recalls a recent situation where a sales rep showed up at a presentation wearing a short skirt and high-heeled boots. "She looked like a hooker," says the manager, who has since instituted a dress code for all reps.

The best way to safeguard your staff from such fashion faux pas is to set explicit standards as to what, for example, constitutes casual work attire, if that's the look you're going for. "Spell it out," says Solomon, who recommends that men cultivating the business casual look should wear well-pressed slacks with a long-sleeved, starched shirt. For women, she suggests a pantsuit with a professional-looking blouse. Also, she adds, "tell them what's not acceptable."

Some managers hold seminars to help reps learn how to dress correctly, or even take them on shopping sprees. Brooks, for instance, has a professional suitmaker outfit his six sales staffers, and often fronts new employees the money to purchase new duds. He also organizes workshops where image consultants go over the finer points of grooming and accessorizing. "The smaller items like your belt and your briefcase are crucial," he says. "If your accessories are not in great shape, it tells people that you're not a person who pays attention to detail."

Even in offices where business casual is the rule, experts suggest that reps dress more professionally for sales calls. One rule of thumb is to have salespeople mirror the outfits of their clients, but some sales managers disagree. When Dave Wolkowitz sold advertising time for a modern rock radio station, he had to call on an outdoor gear store. "Conventional wisdom would dictate that I go in there wearing khaki pants and a fleece vest," says Wolkowitz, who now manages brand contact development for PR 21, a marketing communications firm based in Chicago. But Wolkowitz knew that the client—who was the radio station's biggest advertiser—liked to know that Wolkowitz's team was bending over backwards to keep the account. "I dressed up as a symbolic gesture," he says. "It made him feel like I was putting a lot of work into everything I did for him."

A safer bet, says Sam Parker, cofounder of Justsell.com, a sales consultancy based in Fairfax, Virginia, is to always dress one notch above your client. "If he's wearing a sportcoat, you put on a suit," he says. "Nobody is going to look at you poorly because you are slightly overdressed."

Slightly is the key word here. There is a danger of going overboard as well. Bob Mander, author of *Sales: Building Lifetime Skills for Success*, recalls when he once called on a client in the publishing industry. While waiting for the prospect, he heard someone yell, "There's a suit here to see you!" "I went home and bought a sportcoat," he says.

Once you've given reps guidelines on how to dress, you may have to speak individually with those who continue to project the wrong image, says Steve Waterhouse, a principal at Waterhouse Group, a sales consulting firm in Scarborough, Maine. "Don't get too personal," Waterhouse advises. Instead, explain to them how dressing better

can help them make more money. "Say, 'Here's why I think wearing this will look better for you,'" he says. "Couch it as a benefit for the salesperson."

Of course, there may be cases where you choose to ignore a salesperson's fashion faux pas. Waterhouse recalls an instance when he worked as a sales manager in the electrical components industry where one rep wore outlandish plaid sportjackets. "He looked just like that cheesy guy from WKRP in Cincinnati," Waterhouse says. Before confronting the salesman, Waterhouse decided to go on a few sales calls with the rep to see how his clients reacted to his bizarre attire.

"I realized that this guy's clients loved him because he oozed service and sincerity," he says. After that day, Waterhouse elected not to say anything to the rep about his clothing choices. "The look was obviously working for him," he says.

The Skinny on Overweight Reps

Eric Steele spent six years working as a rep for a national leasing company based on the West Coast. During that time, he watched as his colleague- an energetic, hard worker who was about 5- feet10 and 300 pounds- continually got passed over for promotions. "Because he was fat, he wasn't seen as a serious player that could be presented to clients as a key member of our team," says Steele, who has since switched jobs. "He just didn't show well."

Indeed, more than 53 percent of the respondents in the S&MM survey felt that overweight salespeople have a tougher time making sales. Unfortunately, stereotypes that portray overweight people as being lazy or incompetent pervade the business world. "There's a perception that fat people don't pay attention to important things" Waterhouse says. "Their chance of getting respect is dramatically smaller than the chances of a thin person."

Refusing to hire or promote overweight reps is potentially discriminatory. In some states, disability laws protect those whose obesity is the result of a medical condition. And employers who refuse to hire overweight women, but readily accept overweight men, are treading on thin ice. "If an employer has a weight or standard, it has to be applied evenly across the board," says Richard L. Steer, cohead of the employment group at Jones Hirsch Connors & Bull, a New York-based law firm.

What managers can-and should-concentrate on is encouraging overweight reps to project a stylish and energetic image. "Focus on how that person's clothes fit her and whether or not she has an up-to-date look," Waldrop says. "These are issues that you can help her correct."

Mander strongly encourages such salespeople to maintain a regular exercise program. "You don't need to be a body builder or a beauty queen but you must give off the essence of good health and vibrancy," he says. "Your customers need to know that you're going to be energetic in pursuing their needs."

Money Talks

It's not just how sales executives look that's important-how they spread their message is key, too. Reps who use foul language, use slang, or speak with a heavy regional or foreign accent have a more difficult time closing deals, according to the S&MM survey.

Charlene Golden knows this all too well. Two years ago, Golden and a coworker were about to close a \$300,000 deal over lunch with their most promising new prospect. But when the topic of conversation suddenly turned to a woman in the industry the three of them all knew, Golden's coworker made a fatal mistake: "He used

the 'c' word" to describe the woman," says Golden, who is still fuming about the incident even though it occurred nearly two years ago. (She now works for a different firm.) After the word was uttered, Golden says her client-a woman-looked at the two in disgust. "The camaraderie was gone," she says, "and she took off soon after," without signing on the dotted line.

Golden says her colleague called the prospect later to apologize for his salty language, but to no avail: "Our professional image had been shattered with the use of one word," she says.

"Salespeople who swear are taking a big risk," says Jim O'Connor, author of Cuss Control. "At best, they're express-ing negativity. And at,,worst, they're con-veying that they don't have any respect for their client."

O'Connor recommends that sales managers encourage reps to curb foul language when they're talking with clients - even ones they feel comfortable with. Steele agrees. "I don't care who I'm talking to," says the sales manager, who often calls on clients who use foul language themselves. "You never know when a certain word is going to make someone feel uncomfortable. Why risk it?"

It's not just off-color language that is problematic. Experts say slang and jargon should be avoided, too. At Topnotch at Stowe Resort & Spa in Stowe, Vermont, sales reps attend weekly workshops that address such topics as how to use proper grammar. "We represent a luxury property so we can't go into sales calls using a lot of 'ums' and 'ahs,'" says Nicole Junas, the resort's sales and marketing manager. "We'd lose all credibility."

Managers who work to help reps project a positive personal image - through: style and language - aren't just ensuring, they present a prettier picture to clients. Studies have shown that those who dress professionally feel better about them selves - and present a more confident image to clients. "I'm more comfortable' standing in front of a client when I'm dressed up and well-groomed," says Burt Smith, vice president of marketing for MediaBin, a high-tech firm in Atlanta. Though Smith wears business casual attire around his office - ever donning jeans on Fridays - he won't go to a client's office in anything less than a pair of heavy wool slacks and a starched shirt. "Looking good is a critical part of a salesperson's self-confidence," he says. Image experts agree. "Salespeople who look good exude confidence about their companies and themselves," Waldrop says. "What manager wouldn't want to help their (reps) learn to feel that way?".

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