

RWW

UNIFORM & SAFETY MANAGEMENT

Made Easy

UNLOCKING VALUE HIDDEN IN UNIFORMS, APPAREL AND PPE



THERE'S A LOT MORE AT STAKE WHEN MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT APPAREL THAN JUST COST. IS YOUR PEOPLE'S APPEARANCE ENHANCING OR DAMAGING YOUR BRAND AND REPUTATION?

The way your employees and contractors dress is not only a significant trigger to how they might perform on the job, but also how they – and your company, are perceived in terms of professionalism, trustworthiness and credibility. Research has repeatedly shown that people who look and feel “the business” are more likely to perform well, be given more credibility and present a more attractive and professional image to customers and prospective customers.

Given the importance of this link between the image projected to our customers and the likelihood of them becoming or remaining customers, uniforms and work-wear are fast becoming a responsibility and focal point for marketing teams across all manner of business sectors.

Alongside the brand creation or reinforcement a new uniform or line of work-wear can provide for a business, goes a basic need for practicality and safety. To have a newly designed uniform entirely unfit for purpose is the very definition of a pointless exercise. But every day companies employing people who have to wear uniforms – including PPE, fail to take advantage of thousands of opportunities to reinforce their brands and create substantial value in their businesses. There are also more than a few companies that everyday destroy value by allowing their people to represent them wearing shabby, unprofessional, poorly designed uniforms.

The differing requirements of a uniform incorporating brand-reinforcing PPE bring with them a need for a new style of collaboration. Leading companies not only routinely include marketing team members, who will ensure that designs are consistent with the company's branding, but also other functions within the business such as HR, health and safety and, of course, the eventual wearers of the uniform and PPE, to ensure the design is fit for purpose, conforms to legislative requirements and allows them to optimally perform their roles.

More companies are now employing in-house focus groups, which allow time for all views to be aired and a considered decision to be made on the final designs. Pragmatic approaches of this nature are fueling an accelerating evolution of uniform and PPE to produce products that are not only much more practically suited to the daily duties and comfort of the wearers, but also consistently projecting an enhanced overall company image. Perhaps the most prominent example of this transition is the development of police uniforms from the starched, sturdy, almost suit-like uniforms of the past, to the current practical and fully functional designs that are now part of nearly all modern uniforms.

The view of uniforms and branded PPE as high-value marketing tools rather than commoditised expense items is driving more focus on branding and imagery. The wider availability of branded work wear and PPE, such as Helly Hansen, Black

Rock and CAT, is now another tool available to marketers to help boost image, improve customer perceptions and also make employees and contractors feel more like part of a team. A recent survey of 13,000 workers across a range of business sectors in the United Kingdom, revealed that more than 90 per cent argued that what a person is wearing determines how professional and trustworthy they look, while almost 40 per cent said “scruffy clothing” in the work environment impacted performance.

Nearly 62 per cent felt that wearing formal wear or a uniform made them feel part of a team and 60 per cent were more engaged in their job.

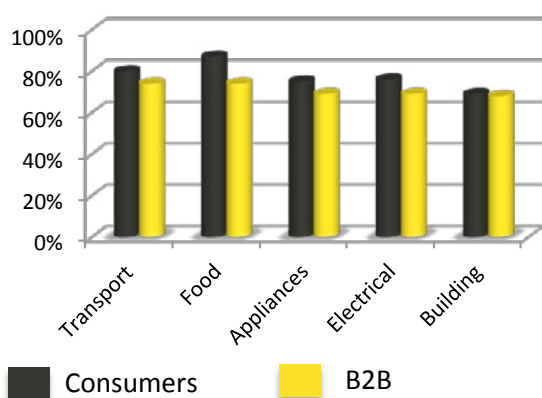


Fig. 1: Positive customer perception of staff apparel by Industry Segment

Adopting changes requires, but refreshing the image of your business by updating or implementing uniform and PPE is no longer simply a cost, but a valuable and important investment that will not only deliver short-term commercial and financial returns, but also longer-term business value.

Corporate Identity through Branded Work Wear and Uniforms

So why are branded uniforms and work wear so important to building a corporate identity and value?

Uniforms have long been used to convey a sense of membership, loyalty and consistency across a group, and to remove distinctions when people are working together.

The most obvious proponents of this line of thought have been the military and sporting franchises. In business terms however, rather than being simply another line of the corporate P&L, uniforms are increasingly viewed as an integral part of a broader marketing and branding effort, whereby the focus is placed on consistency, quality and professionalism in terms of logos, messaging and visual identity. Corporate brand and

image consultants routinely emphasise quality and attention to detail with branded uniforms, and view them as making crucial contributions to creating a strong corporate identity.

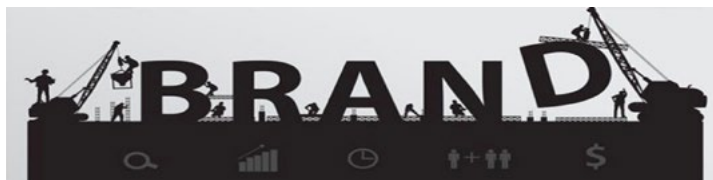
No longer viewed as a safety-related “box-checking” exercise, marketers are now looking for PPE and work apparel that is perceived as “cool” – adapting styles from consumer and sporting apparel industries to enhance brand value while simultaneously meeting OHS and other regulatory requirements.

The importance of uniforms and apparel

Uniforms have traditionally offered a simple means of distinguishing between work from casual clothing. A uniform confers image and status, and can serve multiple purposes from reminding people of authority, as is the case with the military, police or doctors, or providing a way for a large group to associate membership, as is the case with the schools. Uniforms also provide invaluable visual representations in terms of knowledge and function, and in business terms can create the repetitively positive and reassuring impressions so important to building brand value in Business-to-Business markets.

For businesses, particularly those who’s direct and indirect representatives are on-show with customers every day, well-designed uniforms and work wear is all about extending an existing brand, and about putting customers in the right frame of mind when they see or meet your people. A quality, professionally presented uniform has been repeatedly shown by research to be a fundamental part of how customers perceive the relative authority or quality of the company being represented.

Figure 1 opposite summarises the findings of a recent quantitative study of *Customer Perception of Uniforms in the Market Place in the US* and illustrates the impact of apparel on customer perceptions.



Effective brand building is a process, which involves the development, and continuous repetition of positive associations between a product or service and audiences.

A uniform represents one way in which those values can be continually reinforced.

Uniforms can indicate quality through a prominent design and logo, as well as cleanliness to signify reliability. Shortly after implementing a branded uniform, which was colour and brand coded to reflect the business, [company name] saw its measures of customer's satisfaction and ease of interaction improve dramatically. Feedback from customers was simply that the well-presented, logo-identified employees appeared more "official-looking".

Unfortunately the reverse can also be the case. Sub-optimal uniform and work wear – scruffy, tired-looking, dirty, will almost certainly have the opposite effect; destruction of brand and value. We are no longer talking about this as an optional "nice-to-have".

Companies who get this right are more on average X% more profitable than their competitors. The return on investment is hard to debate.

Control over brand image also makes it less difficult for companies to maintain the consistency of their identity when dealing with customers. When building a corporate identity, strong branding frequently involves creating integrated marketing campaigns that both highlight key products and services, but also convey a strong sense of the appeal of a brand by using particular colours and slogans.

Apple is probably the world's most obvious example. And as in the case of Apple, the uniforms worn by the people we all meet in the Apple stores contributes powerfully to the overall branding effort by reinforcing colour and logo connections, while providing a tangible and physical link between Apple's employees and the perception of the brand.

Company Culture and safety

Then there are the obvious positive impacts that branded uniform and work wear has on people and culture, with staff able to take pride in a comfortable, high-quality design. Attaching or engaging people with a brand similarly makes it easier to bring together disparate groups and even sub-cultures within larger organisations, when there is a clear sense of corporate values and what a company stands for, and how wearing of a uniform can fit into that. Human beings, unless they are sociopaths, are more comfortable, engaged and likely to perform better if and when they feel they are part of a team, and studies of workplace behaviour have repeatedly shown how uniforms contribute directly to that sense of well being and engagement.

Branding benefits aside, there are crucial safety regulations for industrial environments where quality is essential to

protecting staff should an accident occur. To this end, it's worth remembering that the best-branded uniforms carry not only a branding advantage, but a safety, insurance and employee benefit.

"Investments in uniform and related apparel can have far-reaching impacts in terms of customer loyalty, employee satisfaction and market perception of an organisation's brand and values."

- CRAIG MCKELL, RPMG

Employee and Customer Loyalty

Studies such as the **Emerald Management Reviews** have shown that a company's investment in uniform and a consistent brand identity can have far reaching effects in terms of customer loyalty and employee satisfaction. While much of the research to date relates to the hotel, restaurant and hospitality sectors, repeatedly indicating how employees that have been involved in the design and style of a uniform have more positive attitudes towards their work and that positive employee engagement directly correlates with customer attitudes, the results are no less relevant for any business with employees regularly engaged or in view of customers.

It is therefore crucially important that organisations commit the time and resources necessary to properly consider what kind of values are being communicated by their branded (or non-branded) uniforms and work wear, and whether they are comfortable with how those messages are being conveyed. This is particularly important for [style of business – construction, project, etc] business, where investing in a low quality or poorly designed uniform in the mistaken assumption that customers don't care what their people look like, can cause substantial brand damage and negative impressions which can take many years to repair.

Over time, a well-designed uniform can act as a form of ongoing promotion, effectively acting as "walking billboards" for the brand. The more invested in making uniform, work-wear and PPE an essential part of the overall corporate culture, the more likely that the organisation will benefit from a strong sense of trust at point of customer engagement and during staff and customer interactions. Depending on the business, the additional use of a uniform to include details of promotions and slogans can again reinforce messages when employees interact with customers.