


Your Best Foot Forward: Image in the Workplace

By Gina Gotsill



Personal and professional image can make or break your employees' careers—and how your organization is perceived.

Picture this: The CEO is presenting her new ideas for the next quarter. You notice your co-worker texting and checking email. Another co-worker, dressed in rumpled jeans and a t-shirt, yawns. After the meeting, your manager asks you to introduce a new employee to others. You oblige, and then dish on everyone in the office.

What do these simple actions say about you and your co-workers? Like it or not, the way we dress, carry ourselves, and interact with others speak volumes about who we are and contribute to the professional image we present.

But personal and professional image extends beyond the office door to other parts of the professional community. In fact, more companies are finding that employees' demeanor and behavior—and how others perceive them—can affect a company's reputation, and ultimately, the bottom line. Some companies are tackling professional image and business etiquette and are training employees on how to step it up a notch.

The basics of image and etiquette

Several key concepts are at the heart of image and business etiquette training. First, employees must be aware of how their personal and professional image, dress, behavior, and other peoples' perceptions help—or hinder—their progress in the workplace.

Second, employees and leaders must be willing to give up something to create a unified company image, according to Michael E. Parker, president and CEO of Value-Centered Enterprise, a professional services firm based in San Pablo, California. That means employees may need to reign in their personal styles a bit, and leaders may need to give up their hard-line positions.

Third, everyone must acknowledge that business etiquette isn't just about the firm handshake. Rather, it's about putting others at ease, says Diane Gottsman, owner of the Protocol School of Texas. Ultimately, people do business with those with whom they are most comfortable working.

But how do you train employees to

enhance their professional image—and the company's? How do you get employees to first look inward and then think about the good of the group?

Employees usually respond favorably to an inclusive approach that doesn't single out individuals, notes Juanita Ecker of Professional Image Management in Columbia, South Carolina. Ecker, who primarily trains employees who are being groomed for leadership positions, recalls a young man who thanked her after one of her business etiquette presentations: "Whether I stay at this company or go somewhere else, I will use these lessons for the rest of my professional career."

Getting started

Before you buy into image and business etiquette training, assess current image standards. Define the image you want employees to present inside and outside the organization. Then, get familiar with the differences between image and perception and where the two intersect.

Image is what we project. Whether

we realize it or not, we shape our image when we show up for work with a smile, respond in a timely manner to calls and emails, and show interest during meetings. Business etiquette also falls under the image umbrella.

Attire also plays a role. Janet McClain, human resources director at Athens Administrators in Concord, California, recently received image training with other company leaders. She says that the concept of professional image goes much deeper than simply dressing better.

"It's also about how we carry ourselves," McClain explains. "It's about being self-aware, and it's about our verbal, non-verbal, personal, and written expressions. Image even crosses over to our workspace and surroundings. For example, is your cubicle neat and organized? Or do you have coffee stains all over your desk?"

Perception, on the other hand, is about how others view you. Employees who dress inappropriately for work or yawn and text during office meetings may be perceived as inconsiderate or disinterested in the company's success. Managers might wonder how these individuals represent the company to clients.

"How you carry yourself has a lot to do with how you feel about yourself," says Parker. "In business, we often depend on others to get where we want to go. If you give the wrong image, people may think a certain way about you, and this could affect your ability to achieve your goals."

Self-assessment is a first step toward shaping professional image. One method is to think of three adjectives to describe how you want to be perceived. Next, think about how you want to be perceived versus how your company wants you to be perceived. A learning assignment could consist of going home and looking in a mirror. What do you like about what you see? What would you like to change?

"People make judgments based on what they see," notes Gottsman. "Every casual meeting is an opportunity for someone to invest in you, hire you, refer you, or discount your credibility."

The sensitivity factor

Looking inward can be difficult. Ecker uses an interactive approach to get learners talking. She starts by breaking people into groups and asking them to discuss the eight most annoying things people do in the workplace. High on the list are cell phone etiquette and talking too loudly in their cubicles.

When she pulls everyone back into the larger group, she asks participants to share one thing from each small group list. The group discusses each topic and reflects on how behavior and interaction can affect professional image and perception.

Some companies opt to bring in a third party to deliver this kind of training. Brooke Ludwig, a training and development consultant for a defense contractor, knows how important image and business etiquette training are, but she prefers to have Ecker address these topics. "I would feel comfortable teaching this in another organization, but not where I work every day," Ludwig says. "You need someone who is neutral and removed."

For Parker, image training is all about listening to individuals and then looking for opportunities to bring everyone together to focus on a common vision. What message does the company want to communicate to the world? Success is only possible if all parties give a little. The whole effort can backfire if company leaders force change on employees and say "deal with it," notes Parker.

Explaining the why behind the training helps everyone get on the same page, McClain adds. After the image

training at her office, she drafted a new professional image policy and shared it with employees in leadership roles and an influential team member. She listened to feedback and made a few changes before distributing it to all employees. Managers followed up quickly and took time to speak to their reports and answer questions.

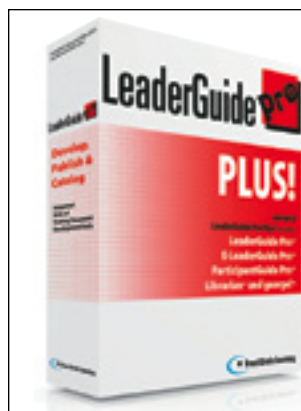
"We have become very clear about what our expectations are," McClain says. "Instead of just distributing a policy, we have taken the time to explain it. We have also taken an extra step to explain that this is not just about dress; this is about your professional image and the impact it has on your success. That has helped to create a lot more awareness."

Measuring the effort

McClain followed up the image training with a Level 1 survey. Reviews were largely positive, she says. Beyond this, she has seen some evidence that people are taking their professional image more seriously. Holding the training program and documenting and distributing the company's new expectations were the first steps toward merging the brand with image and corporate culture.

"Companies want the complete package," Ecker says. "They want employees to be competitive, and they want to groom people they like. Business etiquette gives people the tools they need to work with others."

Gina Gotsill is marketing and proposal manager at TechProse; gina@techprose.com.



The fastest, easiest way to dynamically build consistent, professional, facilitator-led training materials.

www.greatcirclelearning.com