

CHAPTER 14: Land Mine!

Dress Code

Ask a product manager at Procter & Gamble, or Hewlett-Packard, or any business you like if packaging is important to the success of their brand and after they stop hyperventilating they'll tell you "yes." America buys the box. And no doubt about it. And your dress code is a critical part of your personal packaging.

"But wait Mart, these are the days of 'business casual.' This is the new economy. We don't need that suit and tie jazz anymore. That mentality is over with. Right?"

Um, no, it isn't. I don't care what days these are or what economy this is. If you want to make a good impression during the face-to-face meeting, dress the part. And when in doubt, over-dress a bit.

Any time I go to meet a client or a potential client, I wear a tie. If only to impart a tacit sign of respect. If the client tells me that the next time we meet they'd prefer I dress casually, then I do. But not until they tell me. If you want to be taken seriously, my advice is to over dress just a bit.

I used to work with this guy to whom I will refer as the Glass Man. The Glass Man was a rare gem of an employee for quite a few reasons. One of his gifts was his ability in front of an audience. He transmitted credibility with every word out of his mouth. This was simply because he was

Dress Code

without peer in his knowledge of his particular discipline. In an effort to put the Company's best foot forward I tried to keep The Glass Man in front of as many of our sales people and customers as possible. While he was working on my team he used to have to fly quite a bit. He explained the reasons for proper aviator dress code this way:

The Glass Man: Mart, you know I'm a good flier. Flying doesn't bother me. Rain. Turbulence. Whatever. I never worry. Wanna know why?

Marty: Lay it on me.

The Glass Man: When I walk onto a plane I always sneak a look left into the cockpit. Every time. I always look into the cockpit. And every time I do I see one or two people sitting there in that cramped space going over charts and flipping switches. But I don't care what they're doing. I care what they're *wearing*.

Marty: Pilot stuff.

The Glass Man: You bet they are. They always wear the nice white shirts with epaulets on their shoulders and maybe a blue pilot's cap. And this is just as it should be.

Marty: That's what pilots look like.

The Glass Man: That's my point! Does that make them fly better? No. But let me tell you this, if I'm ever getting on a plane and I see two people sitting there in the cockpit and they're wearing khaki's and golf shirts, I'm turning around and running my little legs back up the jetway fast like you read about. No way I'm getting on that plane.

Marty: Me neither.

Communication Land Mines!

The Glass Man: Of course not. And you could tell me these were the two most reliable and gifted pilots in the history of recorded flight and I'd still tell you no way.

The Glass Man has a point. Pilots look the part for a reason. So do doctors, law enforcement personnel, lab scientists and business people. What they wear sends a message to their audience. They know that anyone who meets you or even sees you is going to have some sort of visceral response to the way you physically present yourself. Leaving nothing to chance, you want to make sure this response is positive.

I interviewed many job applicants during my tenure in Corporate Headquarters and I will tell you that for better or worse, how the candidate presented him- or herself counted. It just did.

For example, I interviewed a young lady once for a mid-level marketing job. We met in a coffee shop. I got there early and grabbed a seat. I'd only talked with her on the phone so I had no idea what she looked like. As I sat reading the paper I kept looking up as people entered the store.

One of the times I looked up I saw a young lady with short black hair, wearing a yellow sundress and sandals. I immediately went back to my paper. This obviously was not a job applicant.

Poorly-Dressed Girl: Are you Marty Clarke?

Marty: (initially stunned but recovering quickly) Yes! You must be Liz. Sit down, sit down.

Liz: Thanks.

That interview did not start off well for Liz, the poorly-dressed girl. I did not hire her for several reasons, but the point is that she had unwittingly set herself up with an obstacle before she even started. Would it have been too terribly difficult to throw on a suit or something a bit more

Dress Code

professional for a job interview? She was either lazy or just plain ignorant. Either way, she had stepped on the Dress Code land mine and that in and of itself didn't ruin her chances, but it clearly didn't help.

Avoiding the Dress Code Land Mine

The short answer is: Dress the Part. If you need help there are many texts on proper business attire to which you can refer. I will offer this: Shoes count. I cannot say why, nor do I think anyone knows why, but shoes count. Beyond that, if you want to be treated like a pro, dress like a pro.

I remember one particular Dress Code situation vividly. This was a situation when I avoided triggering the Dress Code land mine in a very large way.

It was spring and I was working in the marketing department. I got a call from Spike. But I did not know it was from Spike. The screen on my phone was blinking the President's name at me. Holy schmoly, Rex is calling me. Even though Rex was, and is, a great guy who always treated me like gold, I was still all aflutter. He was the President after all. He was my boss's boss. The following conversation ensued:

Marty: Yes sir.

Spike: Hey, it's Spike.

Marty: You're in Rex's office?

Spike: Nothing gets by you. Get on up here.

Marty: To Rex's office.

Spike: No, to the Break Room. I want you to guard the Snapple Machine.

Marty: Nice. What's going on?

Communication Land Mines!

Spike: By the time I explain it you could be here.

Marty: On my way.

I grabbed my notebook and it was exactly then that I realized what I was wearing. It was a day when I wasn't required to see customers and on those days Spike allowed us to dress casually.

I was wearing loafers, no socks, pale yellow pants with triple pleats and baby cuffs, and a pale green madras shirt. My own staff was mortified at my attire and now I was going up to the ninth floor. Maybe Spike wouldn't notice.

In Rex's giant corner office I found Rex on the phone. He was visibly upset, and Spike was sitting across the desk from him pointing at the empty chair next to him. I sat down and waited.

Rex: (into the phone and fortunately paying no attention to me) Trunk side! Trunk side! The problem's on the trunk side. If you have a trunk side issue why in the world are you testing the line side? Of course the line side's gonna test clean...

Spike: (in a low voice to me) Nice pants.

Marty: (in an equally low voice) Leave me alone. What's this about?

Spike: Your wife see you like that? She let you leave the house like that?

Marty: You wish you had these pants.

Rex: (still on the phone) Did you call Seaside yet? Get John Seaside on the phone. If Seaside says the problem's on the line side, then I'll believe it.

Spike: Shirt's lovely too. You look like second prize at an Easter Egg Hunt.

Dress Code

Marty: You're the wind beneath my wings.

Rex: (to Spike, holding the phone away from his ear) ...I got five guys working on the problem I got nobody working on the solution. Everyone is standing around telling me how it can't happen when I know it can. I built the first one we installed. Hiya Mart.

Marty: Rex.

Rex: Spike, why's he here?

Spike: He's going to take care of that...

Rex: Oh yeah. Here. Mart. Here's the customer file for Mango Travel. They just called and cancelled their service. It's all in the file. You get over there right away; they're just up on Lynne Road. You get up there and you make sure we keep them as a customer. You do what you gotta do, but if I see them on the disconnect list anytime in the next week or so I'm gonna be asking you why. Got it?

Marty: (standing) I'm all over it.

Rex: Mart, we are not going to lose a five year customer over a two day problem.

Marty: (leaving) On it.

Rex: My man.

Spike: Good luck, sweetheart.

On the one hand, I was very pleased to get the assignment. They wouldn't have sent me if they didn't trust I could get the job done. So I was pretty happy about that.

On the other hand I was about to visit, uninvited, a customer that had already called and cancelled their service.

Communication Land Mines!

Apparently they were upset that we knocked them out of service for two days. This was going to be an inhospitable, possibly very hostile place as far as my presence was concerned.

So at this point I had a choice:

1. Walk in there as I was, dressed in my Spring Bouquet outfit; or
2. Go home, jump into a suit and tie and then visit Mango Travel.

And this illustrates my point exactly. Who in their right mind would arrive at the offices of a valued customer dressed casually? No one. Why not? Because in that situation and in many many others you want to be taken seriously: you want to make a solid, professional impression on your audience immediately.

So dress the part. Job interview, sales call, whatever. If it's face-to-face, dressing up is better than dressing down.

By the way, the Mango Travel story has a very happy ending.

I did go home and jump into my darkest blue suit, a crisp white shirt, and a red "I'll Be In Charge Now" tie, and wing tips. I looked like I worked for the Secret Service. Perfect.

I walked into Mango Travel and presented myself to Betty who not only owned the place but had borne the brunt of our service issue.

Once I was in her office Betty vented. Then she took a breath. Then she vented again. Eventually she ran out of steam. They all do, you know. And that's pretty much all she wanted to do. She wanted to be heard by someone in authority. I assured her that the President had personally requested I visit her. I also apologized on behalf of the company. It's amazing what that can do to an irate customer. A simple apology is an excellent calming agent. I advised her that I had the authority to make whatever amends she thought was

Dress Code

fair in order to keep her as a customer. After we agreed on two free months of service I drove back to headquarters.

When I went back up to the ninth floor to return the file, Spike came out of his office and fell in step with me as I walked down the hall.

Spike: They staying?

Marty: Yep.

Spike: (smiling) That suit looks terrible by the way.

Marty: It's my best one.

Spike: Nice job, Mart.

Marty: Thanks.



Worth Repeating

- ❖ What you wear sends a message to your audience.
- ❖ If you want to be treated like a Pro, dress like a Pro.
- ❖ Shoes count.
- ❖ Anyone who meets you or even sees you is going to have some sort of visceral response to the way you physically present yourself. Leaving nothing to chance, you want to make sure this response is positive.
- ❖ In all professional situations you want to be taken seriously, you want to make a solid, professional impression on your audience immediately. In this regard, your dress is either working for you or against you.