

A Uniform Approach

Employees in uniform are easier to spot when customers need assistance.

By Carrie Burns

I've been shopping in stores many times when another customer has asked me a question meant for a store employee to answer. Since I'm not in the habit of wearing store logos, customers are obviously having trouble identifying employees, and this is a problem that can easily be avoided.

Uniforms for your employees can make it easier for customers to shop your store, enabling customers to spend more money. Uniforms will allow your customers to seek out answers to questions they may have. And, sometimes, it's just nice to know there are knowledgeable people around at all times in case customers have questions.

According to Van Dyne Crotty, a supplier of uniforms, in a recent customer perception survey conducted by J.D. Power and Associates respondents had two common reactions to uniforms. "First, they preferred uniforms because it made it easy to identify who would be able to help them. Second, respondents indicate positive work

ethic associations when they see employees in uniform... Respondents said they 'want to be able to identify who can help them and prefer a clean, consistent image that does not necessarily project a traditional uniformed image.'" Respondents also had more confidence and trust in employees wearing uniforms, and they felt product and service quality was likely to be higher when employees wear uniforms.

Types Of Uniforms

You can choose to either buy or rent uniforms. According to www.entrepreneur.com, buying is generally the less expensive option. So, not surprisingly, about 80 percent of uniforms are bought rather than rented. However, a major benefit of renting uniforms is that the uniform rental firm supplies and cleans uniforms, so this may work best for companies with employees who will not wash their uniforms on a regular basis.

Regardless of the purchase or rent deci-



Customers can easily spot employees at Al's Garden Center, Sherwood, Ore., due to their bright purple shirts.

It's the Law; or Is It?

While there is no federal law on uniform expenditures, many states have laws.

For example, according to the New York State Department of Labor, "the cost of purchasing and/or maintaining a uniform must not bring the employee below the minimum wage. If workers at the minimum wage rate must wear a uniform, their employers must clean and maintain them or pay the employees to do so. Ordinary clothing (such as black trousers and white shirts) are generally not considered uniforms."

The Illinois Department of Labor says employers cannot make employees pay for uniforms unless the employee signs an express written agreement at the time the deduction is made. And in New Hampshire any garment with a logo or of a distinctive design must be provided at no cost to the employee. If not returned, the employer cannot make a deduction from the employee's final wages.

Since laws vary from state to state, make sure to check with the department of labor in your state before setting guidelines.



Retail bench

These retail display units are specifically designed for both green and hard goods and are suitable for indoor and outdoor sales areas, according to the manufacturer. Checkout counters are constructed to work the way you need them to. Nexus Corporation. (800) 228-9639. **Write in 1489**



Tradeshaw

New England Grows will be held Jan. 31 through Feb. 2, 2006, at the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center in Boston, Mass. This annual conference and exposition has attracted more than 14,000 green-industry professionals, educators, students and members of allied professions. Activities include training and demonstrations by industry experts as well as an exposition floor with more than 700 exhibiting companies in more than 350,000 sq.ft. of space. New England Grows. (508) 653-3009. **Write in 1488**

sion, the main choice about uniforms is appearance. Presently, garden center employees throughout the country are wearing an array of uniforms, some employers provide shirts for their employees, some provide aprons, some only have a general dress code. It seems the majority of garden centers are sticking with either the standard logo-embroidered shirts (polo style or T-shirts) or aprons worn with a designated color pants or shorts.

The casual shirt or apron may be a good idea; according to the customer perception survey, "Consumers are indicating a growing preference for slightly more casual attire in typically formal settings; they also seem to be indicating a preference to somewhat dressier styles in settings where less professional attire is common."

The survey also showed that the "choice of the most popular and appropriate uniform style could 'dramatically' influence a buyer's choice of service provider when comparing two otherwise similar providers." The survey gave respondents a choice of 12 uniforms that included such styles as executive wear, embroidered polo shirts, smocks, aprons and work shirt/pants. For most consumers, seeing their preferred style (versus no style at all) increased the likelihood to purchase.

Advertising

One very important reason behind uniforms is to make shopping easier for your customers, but with the increasing need for independent garden centers to advertise and market, uniforms can become another marketing tool. Think of all the places you visit before or after work and how many T-shirts you read every day just walking down the street or through the mall. Your employees can be walking billboards.

The uniforms you use can also promote your image. Once you've decided what shirts or aprons to provide your employees, stick with it. Your store could become well known by these uniforms. If your employees' T-shirts are yellow, make sure they are always yellow; don't have a few yellow shirts, a few red and a couple blue. Everyone in

the same color will make more of an impact, and when your customer sees that yellow shirt at the grocery store or library, she'll remember she needs to stop by your store.

According to Van Dyne Crotty, the study concluded: "Any business organization that in some way interacts with other business organizations or end customers may benefit by considering uniforms for employees. Businesses should consider uniforms not just as a 'uniform' clothing style but also as an opportunity to advance an organization's brand image and upgrade the professional image of an organization's employees..."

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This height-adjustable rotating rack enables staff to display plants of various heights and diameters with maximum visual appeal. It can hold as many as 40-50 plants. Creative Displays. (800) 984-7984. **Write in 1483**

Tradeshaw

Last year's National Hardware Show and Lawn & Garden World featured 895 companies dedicated to lawn, garden and outdoor living. The 61st annual National Hardware Show will be held May 9-11, 2006, at the Las Vegas Convention Center, Las Vegas, Nev. Lawn & Garden World features patio furniture, garden ponds, ceramic pots, garden ornamentation, birdhouses, fertilizer, whirly gigs, etc. Education also takes place at the show, with tracks and sessions dedicated to providing lawn and garden retailers with insights and knowledge. Reed Exhibitions. (888) 425-9377. **Write in 1490**



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