

Dressed FOR Success

**How uniforms can benefit
your company's bottom line**

According to the Textile Rental Services Association (TRSA), approximately 27 million workers in the United States don uniforms for work. By an almost 8 to 1 ratio, the American public likes the idea of employees wearing identifiable apparel and they describe the attributes of a uniformed person as easy to recognize, professional, neater, having pride in the employer, better trained, trustworthy and dependable.

Want more proof? Talk to Mary Miller, vice president of Jancoa Inc., a cleaning contracting firm in Cincinnati, Ohio. Miller was having difficulty with an account. And she soon found out why.

"A client perceived our employees by how they were dressing," she says. "As soon as we put our people in uniforms, the customer began relating to us differently."

Uniforms create a more professional image. And according to Michael Knight, manager of support services for Associated Buildings Services Co. in Houston, uniforms can also give a BSC the upper hand.

B Y G I L L I A N S E N D E R

RENTING VS. BUYING — WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

It might seem that — dollar for dollar — it costs less to buy a uniform than to rent it, but that's not necessarily the case. So says Clifford Weller, the former marketing manager for the Textile Rental Services Association of America, who now works as a consultant to the uniform and linen industry.

Initially, Weller says, there is a larger up-front cost to purchase a uniform. And contractors need to remember that when buying uniforms, they must provide their full-time workers with enough outfits so that when one is being worn another can be laundered. In addition, BSCs must make sure that everyone keeps uniforms clean and in good repair, Weller adds.

Among cleaning firms with uniform programs, garment maintenance becomes a day-to-day responsibility. Someone has to make sure that uniforms are repaired, mended and replaced as needed. Contractors must also plan for garment losses through at-

trition, turnover and wear and tear.

There are several clear-cut advantages to renting uniforms. For example, establishing a uniform rental program avoids the need for an up front cash outlay. Another benefit: with a uniform rental service, a garment inventory is provided to each employee, which helps reduce the likelihood of garment loss or abuse.

And finally, there's the door-to-door service: most uniform services pick up soiled uniforms and deliver clean ones once a week.

In addition, Weller points to a number of value-added services associated with renting including: the proper sizing of employees and new hires; handling garment repairs; replacing worn-out pieces as needed; and providing replacement uniforms for employees who gain or lose weight.

"When contractors do a thorough cost analysis, they tend to favor uniform rental," says Weller.

"Our uniform program is one of the things that help us differentiate from the pack," he says. "In the Houston area alone there are over 350 cleaning services, but you can count on two hands the companies that dress their employees in uniforms."

Studies confirm uniforms' benefits

Contractors are starting to recognize the advantages of dressing employees in uniforms. Two recent studies conducted by the Textile Rental Services Association of America (TRSA), revealed that 67 percent of the BSCs polled reported using uniforms.

This research was conducted by Dan Weilbaker, professor of marketing at Northern Illinois University, and Clifford Weller, a consultant with CTS Marketing Inc. The study showed that contractors feel uniforms create a more professional statute. With company image scoring 9.24 out of a possible 10 points, employee appearance followed closely at 9.07.

"Providing a smart uniform that people are proud to wear promotes the company," says Weilbaker.

Jerry Mirocke, vice president of

of pants and a two-tone shirt that includes the company's logo and the employee's name. Those seen less by the public also wear a uniform -- a smock displaying the company logo worn over comfortable work attire.

"We're in the appearance business," says Mirocke. "Our employees generate and create that image. So when our customers and tenants see our employees, it makes sense that they look clean and neat."

Naratoone Building Services located in Roxbury, Mass., began dressing employees in uniforms in 1991 because management wanted better control over what staff members wore to work.

"People came to work wearing T-shirts with all kinds of different sayings," recalls Emanuel Onos, Naratoone's chief financial officer. Worried that some slogans would insult customers, the company first tried to ban the shirts, a move which quickly became a free speech controversy.

"Uniforms take away the free speech issue. Our employees are there to clean buildings, not to express a philosophical viewpoint," says Onos.

Implementing a uniform policy created an additional benefit for Naratoone Building Services. Because employees were appropriately dressed, customers no longer looked upon them as a small minority business.

"Uniforms change the psycho-

logical aspect of how people perceive you," says Onos. "The uniforms give substance to our professionalism."

Consistency breeds credibility

Champion Cleaning Systems implemented a uniform program for seven of its 16 employees nearly a year ago. Before then, company technicians were wearing a mishmash of shirts.

"The quality and consistency just wasn't there. Everyone was wearing different garments," recalls Larry Banach, manager of Champion Cleaning Systems in Sharpesburg, Ga.

Champion is a firm that prides itself on technical expertise and attention to detail. Worried that employees would appear at customers' doors with dirty jeans, or holes in their shirts, Champion issued their technicians rented uniforms - six per week.

Champion works with insurance companies on restoration projects; promoting a commitment to quality is important in this competitive specialty. When a claims adjuster sees a staff person looking professional, it enhances that person's credibility.

"We like to think that uniforms affect our bottom line, because business continues to grow," says Banach. "We're not the cheapest contractor in town; our objective is not price, but quality is. Uniforms add to that quality image."

operations for Coastal States Industries Inc. in Tampa, Fla., agrees. Nearly 400 of his employees wear some type of uniform. Those with greater public visibility wear a uniform that consists

The security issue

In this day and age, it's essential to identify those who belong in a building and those who don't.

"With so few people in a building at night, I want my staff to be clearly identified - even from a distance," says Associated's Knight.

Security is such an important consideration for Associated Building Services that uniforms are mandatory for its 3,500 employees. Daytime employees usually wear blue or black pants with a matching shirt. Night-time employees wear aprons over their own clothes.

An added benefit of uniforms: they can help keep employees in line. Onos says he used to get calls reporting that an employee was downtown, rather than at work. But with a uniform policy in place, employees are more reluctant to break rank.

"When people cannot be easily identified, they might get in trouble," Onos says. "A uniform gives them an incentive to behave."

Onos adds that employers shouldn't ignore the psychological edge that uniforms provide. For some, they unify the workforce.

"Uniforms build a sense of identity," says Onos. "Before we had our uniform program in place, I didn't see this loyalty."

Uniforms that distinguish supervisors from their crew can also provide a psychological boost. At Jancoa, overseers wear a uniform similar to other workers, but they also wear a badge identifying their position. It's a small addition, but it helps to raise self esteem. For many contract cleaners struggling to find reliable workers, a uniform program becomes a fringe benefit.

Who pays?

There are several uniform rental and purchasing options. Some contractors share the cost with workers; others provide uniforms at no charge. Part-time employees at Coastal States Industries, Inc. pay a \$7.50 deposit for a smock. Workers receive their money back when they turn in the uniform. If the uniform tears or wears

out, the company replaces it at no charge. Full-time employees receive five uniforms that they are responsible for laundering.

"The system works well," says Mirocke. "It's not that expensive to manage, and employees don't have to buy work clothes."

Associated Building Services provides uniforms daily to their full-time people. "There are many different ways of having your employees share in the cost of the uniforms," says Knight. "However, because most of our people work for close to the minimum wage, we don't feel that is a viable alternative."

The cost for Associated's uniform program totals hundreds of thousands of dollars per year, yet is a worthwhile investment, according to Knight, who adds that supplying uniforms is an employee benefit: People don't have to do laundry every time they go to work. For the company, it insures the proper promotion of their name and image.

"People call us and say, 'I saw someone wearing a uniform with your name on it. I'm interested in your services,'" says Knight. "We've gotten a number of jobs that way."

The power behind the uniform

Knight views uniforms as such a powerful marketing tool that he rarely concerns himself with losing uniforms when employees leave.

"Since items have the company's name on it, it still has some ad-

vertising value and name recognition because it might be seen by prospective employees and customers," he notes.

Onos believes so strongly in a uniform program that he promotes it in the company's marketing literature.

"People want uniformed employees," he stresses. "Every kind of professional business has an identifiable uniform. It becomes an advertisement because it gives potential customers a picture of who and what you are."

If you are going to turn your employees into billboards, make sure that these billboards are sending the right messages, suggests Weller. He encourages BSCs to consider allocating a part of their marketing budget to a uniform program.

"An identifiable apparel program will give contractors a competitive advantage that results in better bottom line performance," says Weller.

The ideal uniform integrates itself with a contractor's current marketing materials. Colors should match the company's trucks, equipment and promotional brochures, and blend with advertising themes.

Take for an example, a contractor using a marketing slogan that reads: "We're the force to combat your mess." Adding a military touch to the uniforms ties everything together. ■

illianSender(sender@execpc.com) is a business writer who lives in Milwaukee, Wis.

