

# Uniforms: What They Say About Your Business

By Jeff Owens



**N**othin' like a man or a woman in uniform, it's often said. When you're ordering dinner or checking in for the night, think of all the people you come into contact with who can be identified by what they're wearing. Could be your waitress. The bellman. Or the maitre d'. Might be the concierge, the chef, the valet parking attendant, the maid or the pizza guy. In any case, when you sit down, order out or check in, uniforms say something. To wit:

"Uniforms create an image and an atmosphere," said Dan Ebel, national marketing manager for Cincinnati-based Cintas Corp., the industry's largest rental uniform service and direct sales supplier, and also an award-winning uniform designer and manufacturer. "They make a statement regarding the business, and are a part of what a restaurant is trying to convey. They say a lot about what type of food is served and what type of customer service is offered."

"If you wear something that's professional and looks nice," Ebel adds, "it's well worth the investment."

Obviously, uniforms create a sense of, well, uniformity, which is a good thing in any restaurant or hotel. "It says 'We're working as a team,'" says Frank Brogni, president of Glendale, Ariz.-based uniform company Career Images Inc. "The primary purpose of a uniform is to create uniformity and the appearance of a team. A uniform says 'We're organized—we're setting the stage for an appearance of our theme or the appearance of our property.'

In a sense, what you wear is who you are in the hospitality industry. For example, uniforms often play an important role in the brisk, clean and crisp look of a corporate hotel. At a resort hotel with a spa-type environment, however, the uniforms are meant to convey a quite different message. There, Brogni says, the uniforms say "We want you to feel relaxed, warm, welcome and comfortable."

The perception among guests is often that uniforms make those who wear them seem to be an actual and seamless part of the establishment; as much an ingredient of the whole service package as the menu, the amenities and the buildings and grounds themselves.

"With attractive garb and handsomely dressed people, the whole idea is that the employees are intended to blend into the environment, and not call attention to themselves," Brogni says. "That enables great, smooth service, and that's the desire of every guest. It's also the desire of the employee."

Restaurant and hotel customers often take their first cues about what kind of establishment they're in from the manner in which the employees are dressed. Toward that end, uniforms "give an added level of professionalism," says Bryan McWilliams, assistant general manager at North Providence, R.I.-based Our Place Tuxedos & Uniforms. "The appearance of a business's employees is a direct representation of the business itself. In many cases, the image alone will convey to a customer the expectations they have of where they are. It really sets the tone for what they're going to expect."



photo courtesy of Cintas Corp.

For the establishments, a uniform “completes an image of what they’re trying to convey,” McWilliams says. “It displays an attitude, and shows a level of professionalism and dedication to service. And you only get one chance at a first impression.”

Ah, first impressions. That’s a key point, especially when the competition among neighboring establishments is so fierce. “It’s very important,” says Forbes Cross, owner of Prairie Village, Kan.-based restaurant consulting group Restaurant Design Operations. “First impressions are extremely important among people.”

“People want to be wowed when they first walk in, and uniforms do that extremely well for restaurants,” he says. “If everyone looks professional and is dressed nice, people will think the restaurant is nice. If the employees aren’t dressed very nice and just look kind of sloppy, they’ll think the place is sloppy and the food is not that great.”

Uniforms also clearly delineate to guests visibly and immediately who does what in a restaurant or hotel. You wouldn’t take a room problem to the doorman; nor would you take a dinner menu concern to the bartender. You can often tell which is which simply by looking at how they’re dressed.

“Uniforms differentiate who’s who, which is important to customers when they need to talk to somebody,” McWilliams says.

For employees, uniforms make a number of positive statements.

---

**“Uniforms create an image and an atmosphere. They make a statement regarding the business, and are a part of what a restaurant is trying to convey. They say a lot about what type of food is served and what type of customer service is offered.”**

**— Dan Ebel, national marketing manager, Cintas Corp.**

---

“It says to your employees that you take pride in the job they do and the way they present themselves,” says Roger Mellum of Edward Don & Co., a Chicago-based hospitality equipment and supplies distributor. “If you expect them to dress professionally, they’ll act professionally. For someone in a particular position, the uniform gives that position a little more credibility.”

And that, Mellum says, contributes to health employee self esteem, which contributes in turn to favorable employee retention. Mellum, in fact, believes that hotels and restaurants that don’t use uniforms may be doing themselves a disservice to some extent.

“By not doing it, I think they’re missing an opportunity,” he says.

Cintas’ Ebel agrees, saying that the sense of professionalism created by uniforms “is just as important in the back of the house as it is in the front.”

Career Images’ Brogni also concurs: “It puts each of the employees in the same plane, and they can feel just as competent individually when meeting, for example, a CEO,” he says.

That’s what a uniform says: teamwork, cleanliness, efficiency, order, service, style and quality. People notice. It affects their perceptions and hence their decisions on what and where to eat, and where to stay. It’s important to them, it’s important for your employees and it’s important for your business as a whole. It’s true—there really is nothin’ like a man or woman in uniform. ★



*Cintas Corp. is the industry leader in providing rental and direct-sale uniform service, first aid service and training, and hygiene and sanitation service for all types of businesses, particularly the restaurant and hotel industry. For information on Cintas products and services, call 1-800-CINTAS1 (1-800-246-8271) or visit [www.cintas.com](http://www.cintas.com).*