

Dress For Success

Clarity is one of the guiding principles of effective Communication. “Clear, Concise, and to the ‘Pernt’”, as they say in Brooklyn. A wonderful test for any Marketing Communications Strategy is its clarity and single-mindedness. Is it incapable of being misunderstood? Later, when this Strategy is translated into advertising, is the Advertising Idea clear, single-minded, easy to remember, indelibly linked to the Brand?

Lessons we gain from effective Marketing Communication are directly transferable to all Communication. Therefore, we should strive for clarity every time we communicate. Which brings us to this month’s “McNealy Missile” – ***Dress For Success***.

This latest outburst is sparked by recent communication regarding some upcoming events and the suggested attire. In each case, the attire suggestions only raised further questions in my mind, rather than solving the sartorial puzzle. Further, these vague statements stood in stark contrast to a previous teaching engagement where I was told to wear “Dockers and a Polo Shirt”. Clear, Concise, and even Brand specific. Clearly, my Bugle Boy slacks and Izod shirt were out of the question.

Each of the event notifications utilized language which, at one time, might have yielded very specific wardrobe selections. However, language, customs, and fashion change. So, what was clear in one era, represents a “puzzlement” today. Outlined below are the actual wardrobe descriptors I received, along with others supplied by our network of Marketing Mavens.

Business Attire – Probably means suits and ties for men, dresses for women. Immediately one pictures television’s “***Mad Men***” and a group of dressy business folk smoking and drinking their way through the 1960’s. But what happens if your enlightened employer has enacted a Casual Dress policy for the office? Isn’t your “Business Attire” now “Casual”? See the conundrum?

Casual Attire – One of my favorite executives, Mark Murphy, once commented on the move to casual office attire, which he completely supported. He stated that most people at that time – the mid 1990’s – had either “go to office” or “go to Home Depot” clothes. He correctly saw the advent of casual office attire as launching an entirely new fashion segment. This transition also required an unwanted wardrobe focus on the part of numerous Human Resources departments. They now became fashion arbiters, deciding on the appropriateness/inappropriateness of “stirrup pants”, team jerseys, jeans, and warm-up suits. These prickly discussions soon had HR professionals longing for the intricacies of Long Term Disability cases, which appeared simple when compared to questions of spandex, latex, and polyester.

Business Casual – The direct outcome of Mark Murphy’s vision – an entirely new fashion category. Some companies even hosted “fashion shows” for their employees to present appropriate “Business Casual” dress. There were even wardrobe consultants provided for senior executives. Of course, most employees did not have a walk-in closet full of the required items, so the transition hurt their “bottom-line”, while helping those of Macy’s, Men’s Wearhouse, and Target, among others.

Dress Casual – This sobriquet appeared soon after the onset of “Casual” and “Business Casual”. It appears code for “sports jackets” for men and who knows what for women. I admit to a bias, but women are always dressier than men, regardless of the dress requirements. But then, women always look better and have a sharper fashion sense. Most women in business know that being more formally dressed than required only enhances their image. Regarding “Dress Casual”, I overheard an executive discussing the term at a Sales Meeting, “I don’t understand the confusion, it’s what you’d wear at the country club.” Immediately, images of “**Caddyshack**” romped through my brain – should I come as Ty, Judge Smails, Rodney Dangerfield, or groundskeeper Carl?

Formal Attired Admired, Not Required – Cute but really confusing. In practice, this means the women really look super and the guys are wearing something one step removed from a “Wife Beater” and jeans.

Yacht Club Casual – Honest, I actually received an invitation with that descriptor. What could it possibly mean? White flannels and a blue blazer? Funny little Captain’s or Greek fishermen’s hats? Swiss Navy surplus? Certainly Topsiders, but I think I left mine at Andover. And what if you’re from Oklahoma or some land-locked state? Do they have yacht clubs on all lakes and rivers? Given the inclusion of “casual”, I guess my “dress whites” are out of the question.

Semi-Formal – In fact, there are actual events called “Semi-Formals” on many college campuses (*campi* for the Latin scholars.) The term appears directly related to “**Formal Attired Admired, Not Required**”. However, the term is simply oxymoronic – something is either formal or informal. Semi-Formal sounds like a tuxedo without the tie, or tux jacket and Bermuda shorts – always a good look. Does anyone even have Bermuda shorts anymore and where were the Bahamas when they were handing out island clothing concessions?

Dress to Impress – Saved the best for last. Hear this term several times each week in radio commercials for New Jersey clubs. The mind simply runs wild at the thought! If you read **US** or similar magazines, it appears they’re most impressed with those least dressed. For example, Mathew McConaughey shows up weekly *sans chemise* and the Kardashian sisters appear to continually forget their undershirts! Tell you what would impress me, have someone get on the other side of a club and throw a 95 miles per hour lemon into an Old Fashion glass! Now that would impress, no matter what they were wearing! Or that guy on “**Man Versus Food**” downing a five pound Habanero-laced mound of Nachos in ten minutes! Now, that’s impressive, so I guess there is a bib somewhere in this dress code.

Key Lesson Learned – Clear, Concise, Incapable of being Misunderstood. Remember one of my favorite Dress Codes which could not be clearer – No shirt, no shoes, no service. Unless you’re Matthew McConaughey.

McNealy’s Missiles
July, 2010