

## **Business Casual and Your Bottom Line**

While I usually discuss personal finance, this relates to business finance or more specifically – is business casual affecting your bottom line? I recently attended an annual dinner for the Chamber of Commerce and the invitation indicated “business casual” was the attire of choice for the evening. I’m all for casual dress and if you ever popped by my office at this time of year without an appointment, you’d find me in shorts, a T-shirt and sandals. It’s one of the benefits of owning your own business, but since I don’t usually get a lot of unexpected foot traffic, dressing casually in my office when clients aren’t expected is the rule of thumb. But sometimes I wonder if business casual attire has turned into a business casual attitude.

Recently I went into a local office to pick up a package that had been left there for me. I waited quietly for about a minute and a half until the receptionist felt ready to acknowledge my presence with, “Is there something you need?” Yes, I was insulted and annoyed by her question, but I replied coolly, “Why, yes, there’s a package for me here,” and introduced myself. My eyes let her know that I wasn’t pleased with her tone or her question and you can bet that I will never refer anyone to that office because of the interchange that took place that afternoon.

A few days ago I found myself at a business meeting in another town and I needed to cash a business check. Luckily, I found a branch of my bank, but I’d never been in it before. When I approached the counter, the teller politely asked, “May I help you?” and since I knew that she had no way of knowing who I was, I offered her my driver’s license and she thanked me for providing it. After quickly counting the money into my hand, she told me to have a nice day. I’m not sure what she was wearing, and guess what? I didn’t care. She was polite, helpful and I got what I needed.

One thing is certain – the quickest way to go out of business is by mistreating your customers. With that said, you need to understand that the most important component of your marketing plan begins with your employees. Rule Number One - hire quality help. You’ve heard the expression that charity begins at home – in business, it’s marketing begins in your office. It begins with the first interaction that the customer or prospective client has with your business. Usually, the person is your receptionist, secretary, switchboard operator or store clerk. Many small businesses search for the jack-of-all-trades when hiring help for these positions, but that may not be the best move. It’s nice to have someone that can handle a myriad of tasks, but if they are to have any interaction with customers, their biggest strength should be people skills. Typing 70 words a minute is not a good trade-off for hiring a receptionist with lousy phone skills. High quality help will greatly impact the satisfaction of your customers, which will in turn generate more business.

Business casual is fine as long as professional attitudes go along with it. Don’t forget three important rules – (1) the customer is king, (2) smile and the world smiles with you (even on the phone!), and (3) without customers you’re dead in the water. Share these rules with your employees and make sure that the first person your customer comes in

contact with excels at customer service. Believe it or not – that person can control whether you sink or swim, succeed or fail. Every business owner – especially a new business owner – knows that sometimes you have to skimp to keep things going and grow your business, but the one thing you can't skimp on is the person that your customers interact with first. If your employees are happy, then your customers are happy. So take out a smaller yellow pages ad, if it means you can pay a bit more for that point position. Don't print a four-color brochure – print two-color and use the savings on your main customer contact person. You get the point.

I suppose we can all get away with wearing khakis, polo shirts and sandals if a professional attitude and exceptional customer service exist – although I must say I wholeheartedly oppose flip-flops in the workplace! The bottom line is nobody cares what you're wearing if you're pleasant, smiling and their needs are being met.

As business owners we have the responsibility to our employees to create a comfortable and pleasant workplace. We have an even greater responsibility to ourselves to make sure our customers and clients receive the best possible treatment when dealing with our businesses. You need to believe and convey to your employees that while blue jeans are allowed, bad attitudes are not. Happy employees mean happy clients and that in turn means a thriving business.

*©2004 Robin Vaccai Yess is a CERTIFIED FINANCIAL PLANNER™ and a Certified Divorce Financial Analyst. She is an independent, fee-only financial consultant who helps clients achieve lifelong financial independence, grow and preserve wealth and enjoy a fulfilling retirement. She is a frequent lecturer and writer on personal financial topics. Visit [www.robinyess.com](http://www.robinyess.com) for a list of upcoming seminars or to schedule a speaking engagement for your group or organization.*