

IELTS Academic Reading Sample 154 - First Impressions Count

FIRST IMPRESSIONS COUNT

A Traditionally uniforms were — and for some industries still are — manufactured to protect the worker. When they were first designed, it is also likely that all uniforms made symbolic sense - those for the military, for example, were originally intended to impress and even terrify the enemy; other uniforms denoted a hierarchy - chefs wore white because they worked with flour, but the main chef wore a black hat to show he supervised.

B The last 30 years, however, have seen an increasing emphasis on their role in projecting the image of an organisation and in uniting the workforce into a homogeneous unit — particularly in ‘customer facing’ industries, and especially in financial services and retailing. From uniforms and workwear has emerged ‘corporate clothing’. "The people you employ are your ambassadors," says Peter Griffin, managing director of a major retailer in the UK. "What they say, how they look, and how they behave is terribly important." The result is a new way of looking at corporate workwear. From being a simple means of identifying who is a member of staff, the uniform is emerging as a new channel of marketing communication.

C Truly effective marketing through visual cues such as uniforms is a subtle art, however. Wittingly or unwittingly, how we look sends all sorts of powerful subliminal messages to other people. Dark colours give an aura of authority while lighter pastel shades suggest approachability. Certain dress style creates a sense of conservatism, others a sense of openness to new ideas. Neatness can suggest efficiency but, if it is overdone, it can spill over and indicate an obsession with power. "If the company is selling quality, then it must have quality uniforms. If it is selling style, its uniforms must be stylish. If it wants to appear innovative, everybody can't look exactly the same. Subliminally we see all these things," says Lynn Elvy, a director of image consultants House of Colour.

D But translating corporate philosophies into the right mix of colour, style, degree of branding and uniformity can be a fraught process. And it is not always successful. According to Company Clothing magazine, there are 1000 companies supplying the workwear and corporate clothing market. Of these, 22 account for 85% of total sales - £380 million in 1994.

E A successful uniform needs to balance two key sets of needs. On the one hand, no uniform will work if staff feel uncomfortable or ugly. Giving the wearers a choice has become a key element in the way corporate clothing is introduced and managed. On the other, it is pointless if the look doesn't express the business's marketing strategy. The greatest challenge in this respect is time. When it comes to human perceptions, first impressions count. Customers will size up the way staff look in just a few seconds, and that few seconds will colour their attitudes from then on. Those few seconds can be so important that big companies are prepared to invest years, and millions of pounds, getting them right.

F In addition, some uniform companies also offer rental services. "There will be an increasing specialisation in the marketplace," predicts Mr Blyth, Customer Services Manager of a large UK bank. The past two or three years have seen consolidation. Increasingly, the big suppliers are becoming 'managing agents', which means they offer a total service to put together the whole complex operation of a company's corporate clothing package - which includes reliable sourcing, managing the inventory, budget control and distribution to either central locations or to each staff member individually. Huge investments have been made in new systems, information technology and amassing quality assurance accreditations.

G Corporate clothing does have potential for further growth. Some banks have yet to introduce a full corporate look; police forces are researching a complete new look for the 21st century. And many employees now welcome a company wardrobe. A recent survey of staff found that 90 per cent welcomed having clothing which reflected the corporate identity.

Questions 28-33

The passage First Impressions Count has seven paragraphs A—G. Which paragraphs discuss the following points? Write the appropriate letters **A-G** in boxes **28-33** on your answer sheet.

Example

the number of companies supplying the corporate clothing market

Answer

D

28 different types of purchasing agreement

29 the original purposes of uniforms

30 the popularity rating of staff uniforms

31 involving employees in the selection of a uniform

32 the changing significance of company uniforms

33 perceptions of different types of dress

Questions 34-40

Do the following statements agree with the views of the writer of the passage? In boxes 34-40 on your answer sheet write

YES if the statement agrees with the writer's views

NO if the statement contradicts the writer's views

NOT GIVEN if it is impossible to say what the writer thinks about this

- 34 Uniforms were more carefully made in the past than they are today.
- 35 Uniforms make employees feel part of a team.
- 36 Using uniforms as a marketing tool requires great care.
- 37 Being too smart could have a negative impact on customers.
- 38 Most businesses that supply company clothing are successful.
- 39 Uniforms are best selected by marketing consultants.
- 40 Clothing companies are planning to offer financial services in the future.

Answer:

- 28 F
- 29 A
- 30 G
- 31 E
- 32 B
- 33 C
- 34 NOT GIVEN
- 35 YES
- 36 YES
- 37 YES
- 38 NO
- 39 NOT GIVEN
- 40 NO