



**Rantings of  
a Partner...**

**and Pushback  
from the  
Associate**

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## **Perceptions: Are You What You Appear to Be? Is What They See What They Get?**

*By Wayne Positan*

At the risk of dating myself a bit, I recall an old Gillette advertising jingle to the effect of "You Got to Look Sharp." When I was working as a lifeguard one summer during college, a couple of businessmen, Moe Bierman and Jack Braverman, both fathers of friends, would show up and ask me what I was studying. I said I wanted to be a lawyer. They would reply something like this:

Moe Bierman: "If you're going to be a lawyer, you need to know a few things; of course you have to be smart, but after that, you have to look the part."

Jack Braverman: "That's right, I don't want my lawyer driving around in some old car; I want to see the Cadillac and the nice clothes."

Moe Bierman: "You got that right Jack. If you want people to think you're a big deal, you have to act like you're a big deal."

Jack Braverman: "So you go get your degree and go to law school, but remember what old Moe and Jack told you."

So here it is many years later, and I'm still telling that story. What's the point? How many times have I told associates (and even some partners) that first impressions matter. If your office looks like a pig sty, papers scattered all over the place, your desk nothing but a bunch of unorganized clutter (yes, I know you know where everything is), guess what the clients think? They think you aren't very organized. How are you going to find anything and how are you going to be able to manage their very important legal problem? Maybe you do know (or think you know) where everything is, but what message are you sending to those who don't know you, or to those who do and think less of you because you are sending that message?

Then there is the modern day dress code dilemma. Whether your office is traditional or business casual, there are many stops along that scale, but there is one thing that applies to both, namely looking properly tailored. Are clients impressed with someone who looks like

a slob? Maybe you're brilliant and that will overwhelm them. Most of us don't get that pass.

How you comport yourself is part of our practice. We live in a world of perceptions and impressions. Does anyone think on the day of trial it is a good idea to engage in road rage on the way to the courthouse, act boorishly in the court elevator, give the wait-staff at the coffeehouse a hard time, or be rude to court personnel. Just maybe those who are observing that conduct are on their way to that same courtroom you will be showing up at, and voila! They end up being the judge you are appearing before or a member of your jury panel. The same can be said of your conduct in and around the workplace, and everywhere else you go. How many times have you run into someone in the last place you would expect to see him? That's when the "small world, isn't it" light goes on.

You never know who will be walking by your office, who may be a potential client, or even an existing one of another lawyer in your firm. One never knows who that person you never saw before is on the elevator. So like the old cadence call goes in the Army: "Standin' tall and lookin' good. Ought to be in Hollywood." I think that's a good personal goal to follow. All those potential clients, judges, jurors, and others who are watching you may well be thinking "What you see is what you get." ■