

Dress for Success

How to implement a dress code for your practice.

BY HEATHER PEFFLEY

Practices spend top dollar recruiting new patients and engaging existing ones. When these patients arrive at the practice, they expect to feel that they have stepped into a professional, credible, and capable practice.

Dressing in appropriate business attire is important for every staff member and provider because it presents a visual image and sends a message to patients that the employees and practice are professional and competent. It is critical to remember that in addition to the design of marketing materials, office décor, provider credentialing materials, and the expected top-notch customer service, how your employees dress is a direct reflection of your brand and image.

MEET THE CHALLENGE

For many reasons, creating and implementing a dress code can really challenge practice management. How people dress is often an expression of an individual's personality. Restricting employees from dressing in a specific way, with little or no explanation, can significantly impact morale and increase undesired staff turnover. In addition, discrimination issues can arise when a dress code is not enforced consistently and correctly. Here are some tips a practice owner can use to successfully create, implement, and enforce a practice dress code.

Protect yourself and get a policy in place. Typically, dress code is memorialized in the practice's policy and procedures manual. A dress code policy outlines what is expected of employees related to their dress during work and work-related offsite events. The code should provide clear direction of the overall practice dress code and specifics about common questions related to the policy. For instance, if the practice wants staff in scrubs of a certain color, call that out in the code. Verbiage around the type of dress (i.e., business casual or professional dress) that still allows management and staff some flexibility for exceptional circumstances is the most effective type of dress code. For instance, religious preference or a theme-based patient event day are real practice situations that come up and need to be addressed. In most cases, the biggest issue with dress codes is that they are either simple and unclear or so detailed that they do not allow for management discretion. To ensure that your policy is legal in the state your practice is located, we recommend

you have it reviewed by a healthcare/employment attorney. When the dress code policy is finalized, have each staff member sign a policy acknowledgement receipt form for his/her personnel file.

Educate the practice management team. Dress codes can be unpopular. They can be tricky and sometimes controversial. While dress represents your practice brand and image, it similarly represents an employee's personal brand image and self-esteem. As such, the management team must be able to provide the "why" behind the requirements. In many cases, staff is much more supportive if they understand why they are being asked to dress a particular way. Generally, your staff really does want to "do the right thing" by your practice. Tell them how to do exactly that, and morale improves. Leave them in the dark or deliver protocols with a hammer, and the entire practice suffers. Make this important issue a win-win for all by taking the time to explain it to your team.

Pick a dress code champion. It is best to have a point person who is capable of effectively communicating and consistently enforcing your code. This person needs to understand the sensitive nature of the subject and how to manage related questions reasonably and fairly. For instance, many male physician leaders prefer to have a female manager or senior staff member on point for dress code discussions delivered to a primarily female staff. The important thing is not who the point delivery person is, but rather how the code is delivered, explained, and enforced.

Show flexibility by job title and responsibility. A dress code can vary by job title and responsibility. For instance, it is fine to have your front office employees—who are respon-

PRACTICAL POINTER

Select a point person to be the dress code champion for your practice. Be sure this person is capable of effectively communicating and consistently enforcing your code. This employee also needs to understand the sensitive nature of the subject and how to manage related questions reasonably and fairly.

sible for welcoming patients to the practice and in most cases serve as the initial face of the practice—dress more professionally than other staff members. A receptionist, for example, might be required to dress in business professional attire with your practice branding color being prominent. Whereas, employees in medical roles and the back office may have the flexibility of wearing scrubs in a similar practice brand color with comfortable closed-toe shoes. On days when the physician is out of office for vacation, surgery, or other reasons, staff may be allowed to dress more casually, especially if the practice is closed to patients. The physician leader has great latitude in developing the dress code. Issues that require special consideration are likely based on job title, medical and/or disability constraints, religious accommodations, and medical/disability needs. When facing specific employee-challenged cases and other one-off issues, it is always best to consult with your healthcare/employment lawyer.

Don't ignore grooming. It is important to note that grooming is a supplemental necessity to your practice dress code and brand image. Samples of appropriate items to consider include:

- *Hair color and cut.* A general rule of thumb is that neither the hair color nor cut should be too extreme. In many cases, hairstyle can be directed by the job title. If a provider, long hair may need to be tied back.
- *Tattoos and piercings.* Tattoos and piercings can impact patient perception. It is recommended that they be covered in their entirety for work.
- *Nails.* Nails that are short and professionally manicured should be the norm. The nail color is usually a practice preference.
- *Smoking.* If smoking is allowed during work hours, employees should address personal hygiene so that smoke is not detected by patients.
- *Jewelry.* Jewelry should be simple and professional.
- *Clean and fresh clothes.* Items should be appropriately laundered and pressed.
- *Light makeup and perfume/cologne.* A recent client shared this little pearl about makeup, “Be Grace Kelly, not Pamela Anderson.” A good rule of thumb in most practices is light mascara, light eyeliner, healthy skin, and glossy lips.

Be creative. Creativity can simplify your dress code implementation process and ensure it is easy for staff to follow. For instance, consider offering a uniform or clothing stipend as part of your employee benefits package. For lower wage earners, this can be a huge motivator and makes it easier for the employer to recommend certain types of dress. In some areas of the country, dry cleaning service is a nice value-added benefit for employees. Consider a teambuilding event to show employees the “look” of your brand. For example, a trip to the

mall for a formal makeup application and window shopping at the scrubs store and/or the local mid-grade retail shop can teach your medical staff what you expect.

Enforce your dress code policy, but make sure the punishment fits the crime. It is important to have a prompt discussion with a non-compliant employee who dresses inappropriately. The discussion should take place in a private setting, with only the manager or owner provider and the employee. Whenever possible, assume your employee has positive intent. In most cases, the employee wants to dress the correct way, but may just misunderstand the dress policy description. Usually, it is uncomfortable and potentially embarrassing for the employee to be confronted for their dress error. Most employees will want to quickly fix the problem, frequently making a quick change at lunch or prior to returning to work the next day. If a pattern develops—even after guidance conversations—more regimented and formalized action may be required. Discuss options with your healthcare/employment attorney.

CLEAR DIRECTION

In the medical world, there are many unique ways to include brand image in a dress code. For patients to see your office in the best light possible, it is important to provide staff with clear direction around your dress code and grooming requirements. The visual and nonverbal messages that are shared by the way your staff is dressed and groomed play a large role in the overall look and feel of your practice. When given appropriate direction, your staff will be dressed for success. ■

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