



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MIKE'S EXPRESS CARWASH

Dressing Up the Team WRITTEN BY MATT MAKOWSKI

Uniforms inspire confidence and professionalism.

LIKE ANY BUSINESS, A CARWASH NEEDS SEVERAL ELEMENTS TO LINE UP CORRECTLY IN ORDER TO BE SUCCESSFUL. Once the important decisions regarding location and equipment are made, it's time to think in terms of fashion.

Perhaps fashion is a little too highbrow a word for the garb normally worn by employees at a carwash, but a little couture creativity can go a long way in attracting customers. For others it is simplicity and continuity that do the trick.

Mike's Express Carwash, based out of Indianapolis, currently runs 34 locations. Although the locations spread throughout Indiana and into Ohio, the appearance of the employees is always the same: Red jacket, black pants, and a tie.

"We want all of our people to look professional so that when a customer pulls in, they know who is part of the Mike's Team. That's why it's important for us to have one universal look throughout our company," said Mike's Express Marketing Manager Sally Dahm.

In the case of Mike's Express Carwashes, it's about continuity. If they can maintain a congruous look throughout the company in terms of personnel, a level of confidence is instilled in the customer regarding the quality of the carwash. A been-to-one-been-to-them-all mentality works well for the customer that is happy with their service.

"It's definitely part of our branding. We're in the clean business; and we want to make sure that all of our associates and managers look very professional and clean as well." Said Dahm.

While on the topic of branding, John Nardini, owner of Grand Prix Carwash in Deerfield, Ill., took some tips from one of the national kings of branding, NASCAR. NASCAR has been able to put its name on just about every kind of product out there. There's even a series of Harlequin NASCAR romance novels out there. Above and beyond the NASCAR name, teams on the circuit rent out as much space on the cars and uniforms as they can. That's the part that Nardini paid attention to.

Dale Earnhardt Jr. is synonymous with Budweiser. Jeff Gordon even refers to his car as the Dupont Chevrolet. Nardini decided to take that idea and work with it on a smaller scale.

He sells sponsorships to local businesses and in turn the embroidered logos of those businesses pay for the

(Left) The summer uniforms of Mike's Express carwash.

(Right) The uniforms at Grand Prix Car Wash in Deerfield, IL reflect racing theme.

employees' uniforms. The result is a well-themed, low-cost marketing campaign for not just the carwash, but also the entire participating community.

The theme just begins with the uniforms though. The Grand Prix Carwash lives up to its name. On one hand, it is a top-notch carwash with the latest full-service technology. On the other hand, the theme is so complete, it becomes a place to check out regardless of the cleanliness of your car.

Then there's the lingo. Your car doesn't get the gold, silver or bronze treatment at Grand Prix. It's about "The Indy 500," "The Silver Crown," and top service, "The Grand Prix."

The shop also offers a detailing center, which is referred to as "The Finishing Line." Utilizing the appropriate jargon, décor and uniforms, Grand Prix stands out as one of the more unique carwashes.

Now back to the uniforms. Each one costs \$75. Each year, when Nardini places his order for the shirts, he needs 70 to 80 of them. The cost adds up quickly. Each year, Nardini gets around 20 sponsors to offset the cost. The sponsors also receive annual passes for the carwash and receive a framed shirt to hang in their business at the end of the year.

During that year of sponsorship, the sponsoring businesses advertise to every person who comes to that carwash. It makes for an easy sales pitch.

Because of the high cost of the shirts, an additional expense enters into play. After each shift, the managers collect the shirts. Employees never bring them home. Nardini set up a deal with a local dry cleaning business that picks up the shirts, cleans them and drops them off. It's less stress for the employees and insures that every time an employee shows up to work, he or she has on a fresh uniform that conveys a clean and professional manner.

About 1,000 miles southeast of Nardini's operation, Dave Danzeisen runs things a little differently than either of the aforementioned businesses.

Danzeisen owns four carwashes in Florida that all operate with a different theme. Two of the washes are called

Clean Getaway Carwash, one of which is rather subdued in the uniform department.

"It's a collared shirt with the logo of the clean getaway operation on the back with a picture of the facility modified with cartoon cars on it," said Danzeisen. He self-admittedly wasn't really going for a theme on that one. He just wanted the uniform to tie in with the facility.

The other Clean Getaway utilizes a beach theme. That one was all based on location – it's a block from the beach. During the summer the girls that work there all wear the same bathing suit, which they pick out together, fluorescent yellow shorts, and they are all given a pullover shirt that matches the bathing suit and shorts. During the winter months, it's a cotton collared shirt with a matching sweatshirt.

"It just makes the place look better and more professional rather than having them wear anything they want to wear in," Danzeisen said.

No complaints from any employees yet (or customers for that matter) regarding the skimpy uniforms. In fact the idea wasn't even Danzeisen's.

"Years ago the girls came to us. Body Glove was the company that we originally went with, and in the summertime it's so hot and this particular wash is a block from the beach, so it fit the theme. I wouldn't try it at any of our other locations, but for this one here it happens to fit the theme, so it works out well."

A little further south in St. Augustine, Danzeisen owns a carwash called Showboat. The car wash is built over a retention pond and is accessible only by bridges built for it. It actually looks like an old riverboat floating on the water. Needless to say, they adopted a nautical theme for the uniforms worn by employees of that location.

"We use captain's shirts that have a boat's steering wheel embroidered on them," Danzeisen said. Those shirts run at \$40 a pop. The employee gets the first one for free, but they have to pay for additional ones if they want them. Most importantly, the shirts have to be cleaned.

"We give them enough leeway so that they should have a clean uniform. If they don't, then we hand them one.



We expect that one to be given back and dry cleaned, or they get charged for the shirt," said Danzeisen.

As an example, Danzeisen said the white collared shirts that the managers and supervisors wear at all four of his locations has changed in design three times over the past four years.

"Simply because the manufacturers don't make them, we're victim to whatever is available. There's no consistency in the marketplace," Danzeisen said.

His fourth car wash, Classic Carwash, has a uniform theme all its own as well. "If you've got a carwash called Classic Carwash, what's classic? We tried other things like putting a picture of an old Rolls Royce on it [the shirt]. That worked for a while. We just elected to go with the tuxedo shirt. We thought that was a little more along the line of what we wanted there," Danzeisen said.

Now the employees wear a black cotton shirt that has a screen-printed picture of a tuxedo on it. It beats the dry cleaning bill for a real tux.

Breaking the bank for a good-looking uniform isn't a necessity of course.

"My competition uses a T-shirt. They do well. It's a bright pink shirt and they work fine. We try to do a step above that. And I think we've been successful at doing that. I like the look a heckuva lot better than what I've seen at some of the other car washes. And of course there's others that just don't care," Danzeisen said, adding, "That's just not our approach.

Matt Makowski has toiled in various forms of media over the past six years. He is currently a freelance writer based in Maryland.