

editor's note



MY ALMOST-12-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER IS VERY IMAGE-CONSCIOUS. On those occasions when she accompanies me to the office, she never wears her typical school outfit.

No, she agonizes over which clothes are formal enough to convey the grown-up—and perhaps even professional—image she wants to project. She carefully selects jewelry and even makes sure her hair is done perfectly.

Of course, it's not just my daughter that recognizes that first impressions count. On a recent trip to the west coast, I was fascinated by the wholly diverse styles of the engineering firms I visited.

One medium-sized firm I went to was what I think of as the prototypical engineering firm. The office was highly functional, vaguely corporate, and incredibly egalitarian. It consisted of an open plan with nearly identical cubes and private spaces for conferences. And everyone had the same space whether you were a principal or an entry-level EIT. The company projected the image of technical competence rather than marketing flair, and their niche is medium to large projects with seismic issues.

A completely different impression was made by a visit to a another firm's office. Their clients tended to be larger corporations and their offices presented a more formal corporate appearance—attractive reception area, a mix of cubicles and offices, and a very high-tech conference room. They participate in a lot of video conference calls with their clients and other offices, and their facility included both a camera for the participants and an overhead camera to focus in on drawings. The company projects both the corporate and technical image in keeping with their clientele.

On the opposite end of the spectrum was a much smaller firm that specializes in smaller, architect-driven projects. Their offices were in a converted loft building in a hip part of town. The “green” conversion went so far as to leave the original paint untouched (including bathroom graffiti) wherever possible. Mechanical and structural systems were exposed, and a large

bike rack along one wall was heavily used. The steel manuals on many desks were a hint that this was an engineering firm, but in appearance it could easily have housed a cutting edge architectural practice.

The use of design to reflect your corporate identity isn't only the domain of design firms, though. A couple of years ago I visited two steel service centers located just minutes apart. The first only sold structural steel, and they prided themselves on being a friendly and casual family-owned business, the type that does business with a handshake. Sure enough, their offices were in a building that from the street looked like a nice house. In the back was a fishing pond—and sure enough, during lunch employees regularly grabbed a rod and relaxed with some catch-and-release.

The other firm was one of the largest in the country, with a reputation of having a top-notch management structure. Their board room was expansive and impressive. A lot of their work involved OEM fabrication and they had an incredibly organized material handling department.

Interestingly, both companies have the reputation for excellent customer service and both are very profitable and successful businesses. It's not the particular image they project; it's that they all project a clear image, and one that's reflected in their actual core beliefs.

Look around your office. Listen to the way your telephones are answered. Check out some outgoing e-mails from your staff. What's the image that you project? Does it reflect your core philosophies? Image doesn't just reflect reality; it often represents it.

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