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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to build on a previous one that focused on the effect of visible body modification (WM) on employment. In this study, samples from actual employee manuals used in the hospitality industry were collected and analyzed, specifically looking at policies regarding visible tattoos and body piercings. Examples from those employee manuals are presented, along with suggestions for operators looking to change or clarify their grooming standards.

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By Nancy Swanger

The purpose of this study was to build on a previous one that focused on the effect of visible body modification (VBM) on employment. In this study, samples from actual employee manuals used in the hospitality industry were collected and analyzed, specifically looking at policies regarding visible tattoos and body piercings. Examples from those employee manuals are presented, along with suggestions for operators looking to change or clarify their grooming standards.

Introduction

The state of Wyoming is considering the banning of facial piercings in restaurants. (Wackerle, 2005) What could possibly be driving such an act? Consider the following case, which is real; however it occurred in the state of Oregon rather than Wyoming:

A young woman goes to work at a very popular regional chain restaurant, which specializes in Italian food. The company has a very strict policy against facial piercings. The young woman, who is a server, realizes when she clocks in to begin her shift that she has forgotten to remove her tongue ring. Dutifully, she removes the piercing and places it in the breast pocket of her uniform shirt. The restaurant, which is always very busy, is especially busy on this particular evening. At the end of the night as the server was walking to her car, she reached into her pocket for the tongue ring...it was missing. While she was disappointed that she had apparently lost it, she really gave very little thought to what might have happened to it.

A few days later, a family visits the restaurant for dinner. As they are enjoying their salads, the mother of the family bites into something hard. She removes the object from her mouth and discovers that it is a tongue ring. Imagine her disgust, along with the rest of the family members at the table, as she calls the manager over to her table to show what she attempted to eat with the salad. The manager apologizes profusely and tries to make things right. Unfortunately, from the customer's perspective, it will never be right and her business is lost forever—along with several friends and relatives who were told of the incident.

Upon investigation by the manager, the owner of the tongue ring was identified and an attempt to piece the story together resulted. In this particular restaurant, the servers make their own salads at a station just out of sight of the guests. They are also responsible for restocking the salad items as they empty. Very large vats of salad dressing are kept in the walk-in cooler. The servers replenish their stock by bending over and ladling dressing from the vats into smaller containers. It is believed that when the server bent over to restock the dressing, the tongue ring she had placed in her pocket fell out into the dressing vat without her noticing. A few days later the dressing, along with the tongue ring, was placed into one of the smaller containers and was served.

Wyoming has apparently had its own share of stories like this and is attempting to do something about it. If, indeed, they ban facial piercings, they will be the first state in the country to do so. While Wyoming appears to be driven in their attempt to ban facial piercings by issues related to food safety and sanitation, operators across the

country are faced with a growing trend toward visible tattoos and body piercings on employees.

What were once considered identifying marks for those who were in the military, prison, or part of the biker crowd, tattoos have become very popular in American society. Along with tattoos, body piercings—particularly on the face—have also risen in popularity in the last several years. Men and women of all ages are participating in the current tattoo/body-piercing trend.

While there are many issues involved in this trend (including raising the concern for safety and sanitation standards for “artists” who supply these services and determining the reasons some choose to “self-mutilate”), the purpose of this research is to provide hospitality industry employee manual examples and suggestions for operators who wish to change or clarify their grooming standards, whether the concern is for food safety and sanitation, as is the case for Wyoming, or for reasons related to image and appearance. The contribution of this research lies in helping operators establish policies dealing with visible body modification (VBM) such as tattoos and body piercings.

Piercing and Tattooing Reasons Presented

While several articles have been written on tattooing and piercing from the perspectives of art, medicine, anthropology, history, and ethnology, research regarding VBM and its effect on employment in the business literature is very limited. In a previous study, Swanger (2005) found that 86.67% of human resource managers and recruiters from the hospitality industry conveyed a negative feeling toward the appearance of visible tattoos and piercings on interviewees. With the exception of that study, most articles addressing the issue, from a business perspective, were found in newspapers or trade magazines.

“Everybody does something to their bodies to communicate who they are. Even if just to comb their hair.” (Adler, 1999) According to Selekman (2003) body decoration is made up of three types: painting, adornment, and modification. While some of these are temporary, some are permanent and could be considered mutilation. Body painting is temporary and includes such practices as putting on make-up on a daily basis or face painting for children. Body adornment includes such practices as cutting/styling hair or wearing jewelry. Body modification is the most extreme and the most permanent of the three classifications of body decoration. These modifications include breast implants, cosmetic surgery, tattoos, and piercing (although pierced holes can eventually grow back together, there may be visible scars). Branding and scarification are the practices that some may view as mutilation.

“Although relatively rare in Western culture, body piercing with needles, rings, metal posts, bones, and other adornments predates human history. The literature of anthropology is replete with examples of exotic decorative and ritual practices involving piercing, scarification, and tattooing.” (Stewart, 2000) From around the world, Stewart provides examples of piercing among Egyptian royalty; Greek and Roman slaves; men and women in ancient Persia and Babylon; Spanish women; the French and English; the Aztecs, the Mayas, and the Incas; those in India, Tibet, and Nepal; African and Middle Eastern puberty rituals; and American Nez Perce Indians. Painting the body with henna has been used for over 5,000 years in Asia and Africa. (Selekman, 2003)

Depending on the part of the world, the reasons for the tattoos and piercing vary greatly, including cultural, tribal, religious, assorted rituals, identification, markings for warriors, and others. Today, in modern Western society, the reasons for getting tattooed and pierced vary, as well. “Motivations include aesthetics; sensual pleasure or play; a symbol of commitment to a relationship, possession, or a rite of passage; or a

sign of reclamation (survival of abuse, for example)." (Stewart, 2000) With many high-profile athletes and entertainers sporting tattoos and piercing, part of the attraction to "be like Mike" may influence young people to adopt similar looks. In addition, for some, VBM represents their desire to be nonconformists or rebels—just the opposite reason for those where such practices originated such as in New Guinea, Amazonia, and Sudan. (Gardner 2000) Regardless of the reason for getting the tattoo or piercing, those that are visible attract attention—and not all of the attention is positive.

Professionals Are Not Impressed

As the old saying goes, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression." This holds especially true during an employment interview. "One in every 10 Americans have tattoos, up from one out of every hundred three decades ago. Upper middle-class women between the ages of 20 and 40...fuel most of the growth." (Org, 2003). While VBM appears to be growing in popularity among the general population, service-oriented businesses do not appear to be allowing the look while on the job. From an article by Machado (2004), Richard Franco from Mallard's Restaurant in Stockton says:

If they have a number of piercings, that's someone who doesn't belong in this restaurant or business. Those who do get hired are required as a condition of employment to cover their tattoos, men must remove all visible piercings, and women are allowed only a single earring in each ear provided it is not a hoop and not larger than one inch. We want to maintain our reputation of clean, healthy, professional service.

The retail giant, Wal-Mart, does not allow facial piercing and requires that tattoos be covered. Quick service restaurant leaders, Subway and McDonald's also limit piercing and tattoos; however, dictating the grooming standard for employees among franchised units is a bit more difficult. While corporate offices can specify the look for employees in their franchised operations through the operations manual, enforcement can be challenging. Starbucks, whose units are all company owned, allows no piercings other than the ears and does not allow visible tattoos or unnatural-looking hair colors. (Giron, 2000) According to a survey by Vault.com, a career information web site, (see Gibbons, 2003), fifty eight percent of managers would be less likely to offer a job to an applicant with tattoos or piercings.

Employers have a pretty wide latitude in what goes into their hiring and promoting decisions, and they are within their legal rights to take tattoos or piercings into consideration. That doesn't mean they'll necessarily make a big deal about it.

From the same survey, "...inked and pierced workers who responded to the survey reported a decided lack of equal opportunity: some 18 percent of employees and nearly a quarter of the managers surveyed said such body modifications have hindered their careers and dulled their prospects." While people may have the option to remove piercings or cover visible tattoos while trying to get a job, that becomes very difficult if the tattoos are on the hands, face, or neck.

"In a Sales and Marketing Management survey of 651 executives, Ligos (2001) related that an overwhelming majority said they would avoid hiring sales representative who were sloppily or unfashionably dressed, or those who had visible body piercings or tattoos." Those who are pierced and visibly tattooed will generally admit they are always being judged based on their appearance. Some people are afraid when they encounter someone with tattoos and piercings. While VBM has gained in popularity, it is still not common enough to not draw attention and remains controversial.

Governing Laws Explained

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and subsequent acts, protect classes of individuals from being discriminated against based on race, color, religion, gender,

national origin, age, and disability. Nowhere in the legislation is there specific protection from discrimination for those whose appearance is out of the business norm, except those associated with certain races or religious beliefs. However, even those practices may be called into question. When establishing dress codes, "employers are allowed to consider two factors: the safety or hygiene in the performance of the job and the image that is required to operate profitably." (Vanitzian, 2001) While foodservice operations have a very real concern for safety and hygiene, the hospitality industry, as a whole, needs to concern itself with how employees are representing their respective companies.

How are hospitality companies addressing VBM in their employee manuals?
How can employers best convey their grooming standards?

Methodology

Employee Manuals Collected

The purpose of this research is to provide industry employee manual examples and suggestions for operators who wish to change or clarify their grooming standards. Employee manuals were collected from hospitality businesses for the purpose of providing actual examples of grooming standards' policies. Employee manuals, or portions of them dealing with grooming standards, were obtained from hospitality operators who were willing to share them. As many parts of the manuals are proprietary in nature, business names attached to specific comments and/or policies will not be disclosed in this paper; however, examples of grooming standard verbiage are included.

Comments from 37 hospitality industry recruiters and human resource managers and 17 employee manuals were obtained, representing various industry segments. The subjects were informed of the purpose of the study and participation was voluntary. (While the sample size and number of manuals obtained is low, it is important to keep in perspective how difficult it is to obtain company information that may be considered proprietary—some is always better than none.)

Employee Manuals Reviewed

A review of the collected employee manuals was conducted to see exactly what companies were saying regarding visible tattoos and piercing, if anything. Manuals addressing the VBM issue were separated from those that did not.

Recruiters or human resources managers from 24 companies—including 10 hotels, 10 restaurants, 2 managed services companies, 1 theme park, and 1 recreation area—commented on their company's policies regarding visible tattoos and piercings. The employee manuals represented local, regional, and national hospitality companies. Table 1 contains a list of the companies represented in the study.

Table 1:

Companies Represented by Survey Respondents

ARAMARK
Best Western – University Inn
Marriott International
Choice Hotels International
Disney
Fairmont Hotels
Sunstone Hotels
Corner Bakery
Happy Day Restaurants (Arby's, TacoTime, A&W)
Hilton
Houston's
Jamba Juice
McDonald's
Old Spaghetti Factory
Red Lobster
Sawtooth Grill
Sheraton
Sodexo
Stevens Pass Ski Area
Subway
The Breakfast Club
Venetian
W Hotels
Westin

For the most part, the respondents in the survey were very candid about their company's position on VBM and, along with providing employee manuals or the specific section dealing with grooming standards, many were very up front with their personal position on the topic. Quotes from the respondents regarding interviewees with visible tattoos and piercings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2:

Hospitality Recruiter Quotes Regarding Visible Tattoos/Piercing on Interviewees

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- "Bottom line, it's not professional. In interviewing candidates with piercing, I evaluate that they are not personally ready to take the leap entirely into their professional career."
- "I would definitely say that the tattoos and body piercing are generally frowned upon in the industry."
- "The issue is one of customer impact and safety. Most employers denounce things such as nose rings and other visible piercings."
- "I believe this to be the majority of public opinion that these types of items make people uneasy, especially in the corporate world, and due to the amount of public contact, future managers would be ill advised to take the risk of making this type of statement."
- "A general rule I always used in conjunction with our guidelines was if something about the staff member caught my eye before their smiling face it probably was not legal."
- "I do believe there is an unwritten rule that excludes potential candidates with brow, nose, cheek, or multiple piercings from getting past the first interview."

- “Although I feel that an employee can still do their job well regardless of tattoos, etc., you would not believe the number of customer complaints that we receive on the subject!”
- “While I do recognize trends and fads, I always look for an overall professional appearance and demeanor. It is difficult to underestimate the power of the first impression—both in interviews and with guests. This is the ultimate test for us; what will our guests think of our staff appearance?”
- “Our standard for a ‘business-like’ appearance does not include visible tattoos or body piercing.”
- “We will not even talk to anyone if they want to wear that jewelry while at work.”
- “All that a display of these types of adornment can do is limit your chances. In the hotel industry it will never HELP you.”
- “I can tell you ... that I have a personal prejudice against interviewees with multiple piercings and they do not get very far in the interviewing process with me.”

Table 3 contains examples of verbiage taken directly from employee manuals in the hospitality industry regarding piercing and tattoos.

Table 3:

Verbiage From Hospitality Industry Employee Manuals Regarding Grooming

- Example #1:* Tattoos are not permitted if they are visible to our Guests. They must be able to be covered by normal clothing or uniform. Jewelry should be professional and conservative. Pierced jewelry in visible locations of the body other than the earlobe (including but not limited to the nose or tongue) is not acceptable. Females – Earrings must be a simple matched pair in gold or silver tones that coordinate with a uniform or outfit. The shape of the earrings must be in good taste and compliment the outfit. Earrings may be clip-on or pierced and must be worn on the bottom of the earlobe. Hanging earrings larger than a dime or longer than one inch are not acceptable. No more than one earring may be worn on each ear at a time. Males – Earrings are not acceptable.
- Example #2:* Visible tattoos are not allowed for service staff. Employees may wear one earring per ear (except kitchen employees who may not wear any). No other visible piercings will be allowed, including tongue rings.
- Example #3:* Tattoos may not be visible when you are working. Remove all facial and tongue piercings before your shift. No more than three earrings in each ear.
- Example #4:* Men and women may wear three earrings per ear, posts are recommended. Avoid large dangling earrings. No other visible body piercing is permitted including tongue rings. Any jewelry that depicts violence, vulgarity, hatred toward any group, etc., is never acceptable.
- Example #5:* Visible tattoos are not considered to be in our best interest and are not permitted. The use of bandages to conceal a visible tattoo will not be permitted. Males – Jewelry may not be worn in any visible body piercing including, but not limited to, piercings in the ear, tongue, or nose. Females – One earring in each ear is permitted. Aside from earrings, jewelry may not be worn in any visible body piercings including, but not limited to, piercings in the tongue or nose. In addition, methods to conceal an unacceptable piercing, such as using a bandage, are not permitted.
- Example #6:* Only one earring per ear on females, and no dangling or extreme styles; no earrings on males. No facial ornaments, including jewelry. Body piercing or tattoos must not be visible.

Additional Questions Raised

Advertising agencies, technology companies, and the sports and entertainment fields have countless participants who are pierced and tattooed. While there are similar examples in the hospitality industry—such as W Hotels, Tokyo Joe's, and Hard Rock Cafes, to name a few—where visible tattoos and body piercing are allowed and maybe even encouraged, the majority of the hospitality industry remains somewhat conservative. However, will the tightness of the labor market have an effect on the company grooming standards for current and future hospitality employees?

The findings of this research are limited due to the sample size. However, the study does provide some baseline information about how hospitality companies view VBM and how the issue is addressed through grooming standards in their employee manuals. Replication of this research using a larger sample is needed to validate the findings for generalizability purposes.

Another area for future research is in determining if hospitality companies in different geographic locations (in the United States and around the world) have differing levels of tolerance for employees with visible tattoos and piercings. Also, if there is more tolerance for VBM in certain areas, what is the effect in those areas of attracting employees who do not have visible tattoos and piercings? Are prospective employees without tattoos and piercings "intimidated" by the thought of working with those who have them, and thus, choose not to apply?

The risk environment in which hospitality businesses operate can be rather large due to the number of employees required to get the job done. Have there been legal challenges to company dress codes, specifically any regarding visible tattoos and piercings?

Perhaps the most important research to be conducted on VBM needs to include customers/guests and their willingness to be served by employees with visible tattoos and piercings or their perceptions after having been served by such employees. Does VBM by a company's employees affect consumers' decisions to patronize certain hospitality businesses?

Conclusions

Operational Suggestions Presented

While there are many issues involved in employee dress codes—clothing, shoes, personal hygiene, cosmetics, and hair (including facial)—this research looks only at the issue of VBM and how it is addressed in employee manuals. Hospitality managers at the operational level are too busy to have to worry about being the "fashion police" for their employees as they come to work each day. Companies need to be very clear, right up front, about their standards of grooming. As presented, the examples in Table 3 may provide some direction for operators wishing to change or clarify their company grooming policy. Additional suggestions include:

- Keep the guidelines simple and direct; do not allow for variations that will require a judgment call by the manager. What may appear "reasonable" or "in good taste" to the employee, may not be so judged by the management.
- Make the guidelines known right up front as people apply. Consider attaching a brief statement outlining the grooming standard to the application form to clear up any confusion right from the beginning. People can then choose to apply and abide by the standards or choose not to apply.
- As an employee manual can be considered a contract, it is always a good idea to have legal counsel review the document after development or when under revision to make sure all provisions are within the letter of the law.

- Once adopted, make sure grooming standards are adhered to all levels of the organization—nothing speaks louder to their importance than the consistent demonstration of them by all employees. When properly written, the standards become non-negotiable.

While there are a few exceptions, the hospitality industry overall tends to remain conservative in its approach to employee grooming. The law says that operators may impose a dress code when safety is an issue or the company image is at stake. As visible tattoos and piercings become more mainstream in the United States, hospitality companies that wish to maintain the “all-American boy and girl” look may need to reexamine their grooming standards. It’s one thing to have a desired professional appearance in mind; it is quite another to try and enforce such a standard without defining it and making it very clear to current and potential employees.

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