

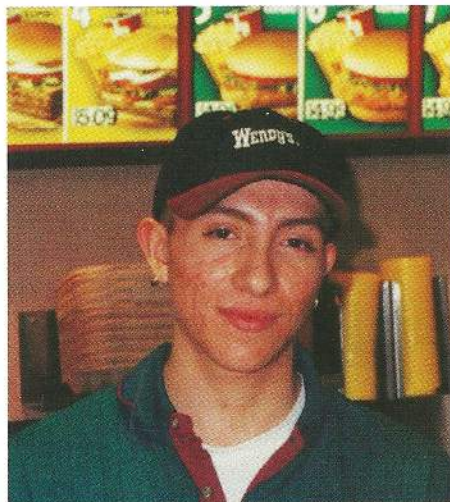
It's a bitch working at a fast-food chain. Standing in the greasy cloud-cover of the fry-o-later is rough enough on teenage complexions, but add Devo-era fast-food uniforms to 300-gallon vats of molten vegetable oil and you begin to understand why teens are always so "cranky." But a job at a fast-food joint is more than just grease and acne. It's snazzy shirts with scratchy collar tags, extension-tab pants with western pockets, and stupid caps that make guys look like, well, jerks, mostly. There are 26-million uniform-wearing fry boys and drive-thru divas in America today, most of whom are in their teens. When *Fusion* sat down with some of

them, and then with the suppliers of their uniforms, we learned most of these kids are not 'n sync with their corporate parents when it comes to getting dressed for work.

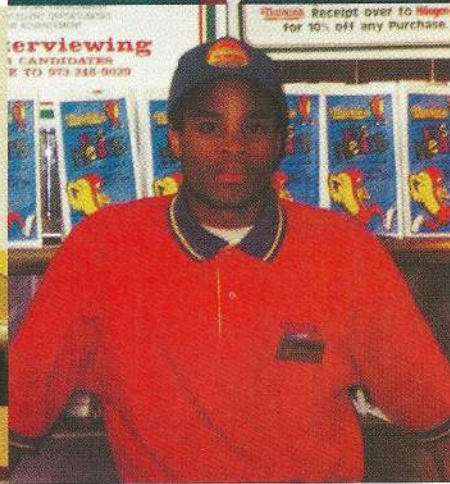
"Uniforms are an extension of the brand and reflect the personality of the brand," explains Sybil Henry, VP of marketing and design at Barco Uniforms, manufacturer for Taco Bell. What does this mean? Super-Size corporations, like McDonald's, spend up to \$60 million annually in conceptualization, updating their uniforms every one to four years in a never-ending personality refinement exercise, that's what. With so much dough being spent just to be popular with, well,

Finger Lickin' Fashion

At fast-food chains, fashion is moving off the back burner, but at slow cook speeds.
By Vadim Liberman



Have you seen these men? Three of fast-food's finest.



everyone, someone might wonder why fast-food is so slow when cooking up colors, developing fabrics and designing styles that are deep-fry fly?

Because "function is number-one." So says Janice Henry, VP of design at Superior Uniform Group, maker of White Castle's regal uniforms. "But fashion is right behind. Ten years ago, uniforms were dorky and now they're only slightly behind fashion trends." Slightly.

As fashion, in general, incorporates more casual and technical sport features, so too does fast-food uniform design, although not at microwave speeds. Bright colors and more durable fabrics dominate uniforms, but they've also become looser and more unisex. Whereas decades ago the military served as primary inspiration for uniform design, today's looks have evolved from street fashion.

Superior Uniform gets its inspiration from designers like Tommy Hilfiger, David Chu of Nautica and Daymond John, co-founder of Fubu. No doubt Ralph and Calvin rest easy each night, knowing their creative genius spawned the inspiration for clothing that goes best with French fries.

Taco Bell's Official Red, for instance, foretells of "spicy" taco sauce and their Official Green conveys that "fresh from the farm" feeling. If that marketing genius doesn't make your hairless Chihuahua grow hair, then maybe Burger King's uniform shirts, available in Mustard Gold, Pickle Green, Ketchup Red, and Cobalt Blue (no blue Whoppers as of yet) will. Or, apparently, in an

attempt to thoroughly confound the competition, Subway color-coordinates its green and purple uniforms with its furniture. Go figure.

You Are What You Wear

Now, no White Castle prince or princess *Fusion* spoke with wants to look like a low-rent short-order cook peddling square burgers in a homeless shelter. Knowing this, Henry keeps the 411 on fast-food apparel at hand. She subscribes to most major fashion magazines—trade as well as consumer—so she can keep her finger on fashion's pulse. "Because most of what we make is unisex, we actually tend to look at menswear more than women's wear," she says.

Manufacturers scout near and far—wherever you are—for what's hip and fashionable. They conduct surveys, focus groups and interviews in order to draw opinions from those who matter: their crewmembers. Says May Payne-Cvengros, Burger King's manager of business services: "If you get crewmembers involved and ask what they think they look good in, they'll feel better about what they're wearing, and hopefully do a good job for us." Burger King allows its workers to "shop" from a selection of styles and colors and choose what they think they look best in.

Style is especially important to McDonald's crewmember Rob, 20, who says, "I'd sacrifice a little comfort if I could have a more stylish uniform." Rob asked that McDonald's remove his uniform shirt's yellow trim, because it was "fugly." Meanwhile, Henry, (no relation to the Barco's Henry) 18, considers his Wendy's uniform fashionable because of its colors, but he's praying Dave Thomas loosens up on the ultratight uniform trousers.

More than anything, employees want to look cool and modern—and feel proud to wear their uniforms, comments Barco's Henry. Proud enough to sport their fast-food clothes at parties or when cruising for companionship at a bar?

"We'd love to say yeah," answers White Castle VP of Marketing, Kim Bartley, "but I think the reality is sometimes yes, sometimes no." How about rarely yes, and usually no? While most fast-food employees would rather swap saliva with Ronald McDonald than hang out in their work attire, Deb Owler, operations specialist at Subway, notes that at least workers are no longer so ashamed, they'll only change into and out of their uniforms at work.

"[The uniform] is a golf shirt, so you can stop on your way home from work and go to the grocery store and not feel uncomfortable going in

there with it on," she says. On the other hand, Barco's Henry claims to receive plenty of feedback from employees proud to wear the Taco Bell uniform off the job.

But the fast-food workers interviewed for this article all had the same reaction when asked if they'd feel comfortable wearing the burger-joint uniform after hours. Between spasms of hysterical laughter, their expressions betrayed their answer before they spoke.

Billboards at the Register

Being paid to wear a corporate image is cool, if your name is Tiger Woods. But for most kids, wearing a corporate uniform—and becoming, in effect, a walking billboard for the brand—isn't a super-sized priority on the High School agenda. What is? Comfort, functionality and acceptance

"I'd sacrifice a little comfort if I could have a more stylish uniform."
—crewmember Rob

from one's peers, for starters.

Teens and young adults resent being a billboard for brands they might not necessarily identify with or believe in. Logos might still be in style, but there's a difference between showing off the Ecko name and flashing the Wendy's trademark. "I hate that the logo is so obvious," despairs McDonald's Rob.

This isn't to say employees aren't proud of their uniforms and the hard work that wearing them represents; they just won't wear them to school or out at night. "I like the uniform," remarks Ronald, a 20-year-old Nathan's staffer. "I'm proud of it because I'm proud of the company. But it's just not cool to wear anywhere else."

As Melanie Kanegis, spokesperson for the National Association of Uniform Manufacturers and Distributors, points out, employees want to wear the choice of uniform apparel that most resembles their everyday attire. "The fabrications are very similar to what's in stores," remarks Superior's Henry. "Sometimes we literally are copying retail samples for uniforms." So not only are uniforms a statement of the corporate brand, they're also an extension of your favorite labels.

"Have It Your Way"

Burger King whipped the clown's butt when it allowed customers to decide what goes on their burgers. Now, 30 years later, fast-food companies

employ this "you choose" formula with stylish uniforms that help attract, and retain, workers. At least that's what the chains believe.

With the multitude of minimum-wage jobs available to today's youth, applicants are more likely to pick and choose where they will work. If they must wear a uniform at work, candidates will undoubtedly gravitate towards a uniform that is esthetically pleasing. "The whole concept of trying to make these uniforms more attractive," White Castle's Bartley claims, "is to attract better and more employees."

One uniform designer actually claims that some employees would trade a small percentage of salary for a slicker uniform, something that Nathan's Ronald agrees with. But McDonald's Rob counters: "Who cares what they look like? It's just a job; I wear [the uniform] only because I have to.

All the places' uniforms look the same anyway."

Funny, most patrons we spoke with say the same thing. Nonetheless, even if they don't notice the uniforms, consumers do notice pissed-off counter-jockeys who chafe under their polyester wraps and nametags. Clean, attractive, fun, professional and energetic are the words used by uniform people to describe what should be going through a customer's head upon viewing employees in their product.

So what style of fast-food ready-to-wear will grace the grease pits of tomorrow? According to Ruth Bedford, special projects coordinator for Terry Uniform, which manufactures for McDonald's, it's the polo shirt. "It's very comfortable and looks good on every body type."

Also expect to see brighter colors and the company's logo popping up in new places, like collars and trims. Fabric performance will take on a greater role, so much so that Burger King's Payne-Cvengros predicts that company-branded jeans are not out of the question. Yet, if crewmembers could have it their way, there would be no uniforms.

"I work in the city, with city kids," says Rolando Cruz, dressed this day in a black skullcap, super-large Diesel jeans and Timberland boots. "This is the way my boys dress," he says. "I'm dressed like this behind the counter? You know how many burgers I'd sell?"

Ronald McDonald, d'you hear that yo?