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ACCOUNTING & AUDIT

Tradeshows Are Increasingly Implementing Dress Codes

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Dave McClure • Apr. 06, 2015



One of the joys of working in the tech industry are its trade shows. A mix of new geek toys and compelling (sometimes) sessions, the shows offered a chance to get a glimpse of the latest and greatest toys, then spend quality time with vendors and associates.

And gawk at the booth babes.

They are the greeters, the carnival barkers, the product demonstrators and the assistants. They wear skimpy skirts, flesh-exposing blouses and tight-fitting jumpsuits. Consummate professionals, they know their job is to draw customers into the exhibit, and they do it well. As women have moved up the ranks of management in this and other industries, they were inevitably joined by “booth boys.” Same concept, same tight-fitting jumpsuits.

Both, now, are threatened with extinction by joyless curmudgeons who manage trade shows and conferences. The RSA is the latest organization to set a dress code for booth people, but they are not the only ones. The Mobile World Congress and China’s ChinaJoy Gaming Expo also instituted dress codes aimed at eliminating provocative or sexually titillating outfits. More are considering such policies.

All of this smacks of political correctness run amok. It is hard to imagine that the booth babes and boys are in some way responsible for the pay of women in tech companies or the existence of a glass ceiling in the industry, but they are taking the brunt of the blame at the moment.

When you've in the industry for as long as I have – roughly since dinosaurs roamed the earth – you remember when things truly were provocative. There was one year when one company's booth babes showed up with their bodies coated in paint. Nothing but paint. In another long-ago show, a software company brought a large inflatable banana, which the booth babes took turns riding.

And then there were the annual AVN awards – the “Oscars” of the adult film industry – that began as an offshoot of the Consumer Electronics Show. An invitation to this event was one of the hottest party invites of the show, and the porn stars would traipse across the show floor bestowing invites on the lucky few. Alas, the event is now held on its own, at a different time and place.

As the industry becomes more mature, the dress code has changed on its own. While there are still any number of attractive people staffing the exhibits, these are mostly dressed in khaki pants and polo shirts. In fact, the only exhibits that still feature blatant sexuality are the ones that are new to the industry and the ones that are desperate to be noticed in the crowd.

It would appear that that pronouncements of dress codes are less about gross violations than creating an “appropriate environment” for the attendees. In fact, most of the most important trade shows already have policies in place that allow them to deal with egregious dress on a case-by-case basis. The Consumer Electronics Show does that, as does the E3 conference hosted by the gaming software industry.

Where this all goes is anyone's guess, but the trend seems to be demands that the exhibiting companies hire only unattractive men and women you wouldn't want to look at on a bet. Like the legions of aging, pot-belling sales reps who are also a part of the trade show scene.

I will simply note that the demise of the booth babes should at least include a passing moment of silence to respect their decades of faithful service to the tech industry.

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