

**Research Summary:**

# Are Uniforms an Effective Marketing Tool?

*Ashwini K. Poojary*

Sawyer Business School, Suffolk University  
Boston, MA – February 2011

<b>Abstract</b>	<p>This research aims to answer the question, “Are uniforms an effective marketing tool?” And specifically, what is the advertising utility of uniforms and uniform rental programs as seen by managers in businesses which have uniformed employees that are exposed to customers or the public.</p> <p>The term ‘uniform program’ herein refers to a service that includes uniform garment rental—customized with company logo or branding— and regular laundering, pickup and delivery, and mending services. This service is also known as ‘uniform rental’ service or ‘managed uniform service’.</p> <p>Throughout this summary the terms ‘uniform program’ and ‘uniform’ are used interchangeably.</p> <p>The research compares the effectiveness of uniform programs as a marketing tool compared to six popular forms of advertising:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Internet</li><li>2. TV</li><li>3. Radio</li><li>4. Billboard</li><li>5. Yellow Pages</li><li>6. Newspaper</li></ol> <p>This research demonstrates how firms may be able to contribute to the achievement of organizational objectives through the use of uniform programs in their businesses.</p> <p>The causal relationship between the benefits of uniforms and desired business outcomes, such as profitability, is a topic of managerial interest and requires further research. There is limited previous literature that tries to encompass the contribution that uniforms and uniform programs make towards desired business outcomes such as marketing efficiency, increased customer awareness, business image, and employee morale.</p> <p>Keywords: Uniforms, uniform rental programs, advertising, marketing.</p>
<b>Researchers</b>	<p>The primary researcher for this study was Ashwini Poojary, a Global MBA student at the Sawyer Business School, Suffolk University, Boston. UniFirst Corporation, headquartered in Wilmington, MA, provided data center services and random selects from its uniform program customer list to aid in the study.</p>
<b>Conceptual Framework</b>	<p>Based on a thorough literature review, a conceptual model was developed. A questionnaire was devised with item measures that capture the constructs in the conceptual model. A survey of business customers was undertaken, and a response rate of 97 per cent was obtained.</p>

<p><b>Conceptual Framework</b> (continued)</p>	<p><b>The role of advertising</b></p> <p>Advertising is recognized as an essential element in the marketing mix and hence a considerable amount of resources may be allocated to advertising budgets. There are several reasons for advertising, some of which include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing sales of products/services</li> <li>• Creating and maintaining awareness, a brand identity, or brand image</li> <li>• Communicating a change in an existing product line</li> <li>• Introducing a new product or service</li> <li>• Increasing word-of-mouth for the brand or the company</li> <li>• Educating consumers about the company's products or services</li> </ul> <p>“Advertising represents a most potent source of brand identity. It has two major functions, namely to present and thereby position the brand attributes against consumer expectations and to imbue the brand with values symbolically attractive to the target market. Advertising is identified as one of the principal components of image creation.” (Meenaghan)</p> <p><b>The role of brand identity</b></p> <p>In an increasingly competitive marketplace, it's important for companies to create a brand identity and improve brand image. Recent research by Gallup highlights the impact of front-line staff on the company's relationship with the customer. For example, employee uniforms are an important component of a hospitality establishment's brand identity. (Nelson and Bowen)</p> <p>Enhancing the knowledge of customers about the brand through marketing initiatives helps companies to develop a positive brand attitude in the customer. (Gupta, Melewar and Bourlakis) A positive attitude towards the brand, in turn, helps to generate a positive brand response for influencing the purchase activity of the customer. (Keller and Lehmann) This brand identity, so developed, helps in reaching out to customers, helps the company stand out from the competition, and conveys business stability.</p> <p><b>Business outcomes</b></p> <p>In order to portray our conceptual model, we argue that advertising is directly affected by uniform programs, which in turn influence desired business outcomes such as marketing effectiveness, awareness, and increased brand equity. Our choices of constructs are guided by our literature review. Specifically, we examined literature on the beneficial role advertising has on brand image development and how employee morale positively affects customer satisfaction. Based on this, we argue that benefits of uniform programs are an antecedent to certain desired business outcomes.</p>
<p><b>Hypothesis</b></p>	<p>Many of the industries in our sample have a significant amount of uniform and non-uniform wearing employees who are regularly exposed to the public. Members of staff are an extension of the brand they work for, and what they wear matters greatly to them and to the firm's customers, as well as reflecting on the company's core values. The uniform acts as an extension of the brand and could be used by companies to enhance their business image. A uniform can provide an instantly recognizable signal about the company and its culture. This helps employees build better relationships with customers. In light of these findings, we formulate a hypothesis to test;</p> <p><b>Hypothesis:</b> Uniform programs are an effective marketing tool and a viable form of advertising that can affect desired business outcomes.</p>

**Methodology:  
Design,  
Procedure &  
Sample  
Characteristics**

First, we developed a questionnaire containing measures derived from existing measures (literature review). This questionnaire was subjected to critical review by a panel of marketing scholars and industry practitioners. A number of amendments were made, largely to item wording but also to question order and layout. After a final critical review, we concluded that there were no substantive concerns and the instrument was deemed suitable for final data collection.

The study was conducted for selected 2-digit SIC Code "supersectors," chosen at random (from a UniFirst Corporation uniform program customer database). The UniFirst call center conducted the telephone survey with 274 customers. In order to ensure the results were not biased, we kept responses anonymous, and this was explained verbally prior to each telephone interview. A total of 267 questionnaires were completed, resulting in a response rate of 97%. We also conducted a non response bias analysis.

**Questionnaire Design:**

Our questionnaire was designed to obtain data about whether several different forms of advertising are perceived as more effective or less effective than uniform programs.

While the survey included some questions about soiling level, cost-sharing for uniforms, and perception of uniforms as contributing to employee morale and productivity, this summary focuses only on our main objective related to marketing and advertising effectiveness. We asked questions such as:

"To what extent would you agree or disagree with the following statement? *Uniforms / uniform programs are a form of advertising.*"

And;

*"Is Internet Advertising more effective or less effective than an employee Uniform Program as a marketing tool for your company?"*

We surveyed companies from the following 2-digit major groups:

- 02: Agricultural Production – Livestock
- 13: Oil and Gas Extraction
- 15: General Building Contractors
- 16: Heavy Construction, Except Building
- 17: Special Trade Contractors
- 20: Food and Kindred Products
- 34: Fabricated Metal Products
- 35: Industrial Machinery and Equipment
- 41: Local and Interurban Passenger Transit
- 42: Trucking and Warehousing
- 49: Electric Gas and Sanitary Services
- 50: Wholesale Trade: Durable Goods
- 55: Automotive Dealers and Service Stations
- 75: Auto Repair Services and Parking

**Analysis Procedure**

We conducted statistical analysis in order to investigation into our data, including frequency analysis, cross-tabulation, Chi square tests, independent sample T-Tests, and paired T-Tests. We targeted a 0.05 significance level.

**Aggregated Results**

**Effectiveness of several popular forms of advertising as compared to uniform programs.**

Based upon our literature review, we predicted that uniform programs would prove to be a more effective marketing tool than several popular forms of advertising, and for all industries surveyed taken in aggregate this proved to be true.

**Results for all industries surveyed:**

Internet Advertising - 56.1% of respondents stated that uniform programs are more effective than internet advertising.

TV Advertising – 73.5% of respondents stated that uniform programs are more effective than TV advertising.

Radio Advertising – 74.4% of respondents stated that uniform programs are more effective than radio advertising.

Billboard Advertising – 75.7% of respondents stated that uniform programs are more effective than billboard advertising.

Yellow Pages Advertising – 55% of respondents stated that uniform programs are more effective than yellow pages (printed) advertising.

Newspaper Advertising – 71.5% of respondents stated that uniform programs are more effective than newspaper advertising.

**Industry Highlight Results**

As we see above, the industry sectors surveyed, on average, indicated that uniform programs are a more effective marketing tool compared to several popular forms of advertising. In several industries positive responses tallied well above the mean.

In these industries we noted positive correlation when wearers are regularly exposed to the public and the statement that uniform programs are an effective form of marketing. This is demonstrated in the response rates favoring uniforms from certain industry groups as highlighted below:

**Special Trade Contractors:  
Most Effective Marketing Tool?**

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Internet
<b>60%</b>		40%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Radio
<b>70%</b>		30%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Yellow Pgs.
<b>60%</b>		40%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	TV
<b>80%</b>		20%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Billboard
<b>80%</b>		20%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Newspaper
<b>90%</b>		10%

**Industry Highlight Results**  
(continued)

**General Building Contractors:**  
Most Effective Marketing Tool?

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Internet
<b>80%</b>		20%

Uniforms	vs.	Yellow Pgs.
50%		50%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Billboard
<b>100%</b>		0%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Radio
<b>70%</b>		30%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	TV
<b>90%</b>		10%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Newspaper
<b>80%</b>		20%

**Food & Kindred Products companies:**  
Most Effective Marketing Tool?

Uniforms	vs.	<b>Internet</b>
30%		<b>70%</b>

Uniforms	vs.	Yellow Pgs.
50%		50%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Billboard
<b>60%</b>		40%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Radio
<b>90%</b>		10%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	TV
<b>80%</b>		20%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Newspaper
<b>60%</b>		40%

**Local Passenger Transit companies:**  
Most Effective Marketing Tool?

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Internet
<b>60%</b>		40%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Yellow Pgs.
<b>80%</b>		20%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Billboard
<b>90%</b>		10%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Radio
<b>90%</b>		10%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	TV
<b>80%</b>		20%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Newspaper
<b>90%</b>		10%

**Industry Highlight Results**  
(continued)

**Agricultural Production (livestock) companies:**

Most Effective Marketing Tool?

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Internet
<b>60%</b>		40%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Radio
<b>80%</b>		20%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Yellow Pgs.
<b>90%</b>		10%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	TV
<b>100%</b>		0%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Billboard
<b>100%</b>		0%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Newspaper
<b>100%</b>		0%

**Auto Repair Services:**

Most Effective Marketing Tool?

Uniforms	vs.	<b>Internet</b>
42%		<b>58%</b>

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Radio
<b>63%</b>		37%

Uniforms	vs.	<b>Yellow Pgs.</b>
25%		<b>75%</b>

Uniforms	vs.	<b>TV</b>
46%		<b>54%</b>

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Billboard
<b>58%</b>		42%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Newspaper
<b>71%</b>		29%

**Auto Dealers:**

Most Effective Marketing Tool?

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Internet
<b>54%</b>		46%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Radio
<b>54%</b>		46%

Uniforms	vs.	<b>Yellow Pgs.</b>
46%		<b>54%</b>

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	TV
<b>54%</b>		46%

Uniforms	vs.	<b>Billboard</b>
46%		<b>54%</b>

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Newspaper
<b>54%</b>		46%

**Industry Highlight Results**  
(continued)

**Wholesale Trade (durable goods):**  
Most Effective Marketing Tool?

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Internet
<b>80%</b>		20%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Radio
<b>80%</b>		20%

Uniforms	vs.	<b>Yellow Pgs.</b>
30%		<b>70%</b>

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	TV
<b>60%</b>		40%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Billboard
<b>90%</b>		10%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Newspaper
<b>70%</b>		30%

**Heavy Construction (except building):**  
Most Effective Marketing Tool?

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Internet
<b>70%</b>		30%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Radio
<b>70%</b>		30%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Yellow Pgs.
<b>80%</b>		20%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	TV
<b>80%</b>		20%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Billboard
<b>90%</b>		10%

<b>Uniforms</b>	vs.	Newspaper
<b>70%</b>		30%

**Conclusion**

**“Uniforms are a more effective marketing tool than internet, newspaper, TV, radio and billboard advertising.”**

Our hypothesis, that uniform programs are an effective marketing tool and a viable form of advertising has been shown to be true.

Our analyses found that the industries represented in our study believe that uniform programs are an effective form of advertising. As suspected, there is a positive correlation in companies whose uniform wearers are regularly exposed to the public and the belief that uniform programs are an effective marketing tool.

**In fact, uniform programs were considered a more effective marketing tool in the majority of cases when compared with six of the most popular forms of advertising.**

<p><b>Limitations</b></p>	<p><b>Limitations and Future Research</b>  As with any research project, our study could have been improved. It is characterized by limitations that may restrict the extent to which results can be reliably generalized. There might be other variables or moderators that influence perceptions about uniforms marketing and advertising.</p> <p>The implications and limitations of our study offer a number of potentially interesting future research projects. First, although our model contains a number of constructs, it would be useful to incorporate other factors that may also influence business outcomes. For example, how uniform programs may affect worker professionalism and safety. Future studies could include a wider range of constructs thus broadening the scope of the model and associations between constructs. Second, more granular industry surveys could be completed to capture specific related constructs.</p>
<p><b>References</b></p>	<p>Kevin Lane Keller and Donald R. Lehmann. "Brands and Branding: Research Findings and Future Priorities." <i>Marketing Science</i> (November- December 2006): 740-759.</p> <p>Meenaghan, Tony. "The role of advertising in brand image development." <i>Journal of Product and Brand Management</i> (1995): 23-34.</p> <p>Kathy Nelson, John Bowen. "The Effect of Employee Uniforms on Employee Satisfactio." <i>Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly</i> (n.d.): 86-95.</p> <p>Suraksha Gupta, T.C. Melewar, Michael Bourlakis. "Transfer of brand knowledge in business-to-business markets: a qualitative study." <i>Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing</i> (n.d.): 395 - 403.</p>
<p><b>About the Researchers</b></p>	<p><b>Ashwini K. Poojary</b>  Ashwini Poojary is the Director of Marketing and Communications of the Graduate Student Association at <i>Suffolk University, Boston, MA</i>. She has held positions as Market Researcher and IT Analyst for <i>Partners HealthCare</i>, where she conducted in-depth interviews with pathologists and technicians prior to the launch of a new software, and Assistant Systems Engineer/Applications Analyst for <i>Tata Consultancy Services</i>, where she helped develop core banking software for Banco de Pichincha (Ecuador), Mercantile Bank (S. Africa) and National Bank of Kuwait, and tested wealth management applications for Merrill Lynch and Bank of America. Ms. Poojary has also served as Marketing Team Leader and Customer Relationship Officer at <i>Bhagwati Pharmaceuticals</i> of India. She has earned a Bachelors of Engineering, Electronics from the <i>Dwarkadas J Sanghavi College of Engineering</i> and is a Member of <i>Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers</i>. Ms. Poojary has attended the <i>S.I.E.S. College of Arts, Science and Commerce</i> and is a candidate for Global MBA, International Marketing at <i>Suffolk University, Sawyer School of Management</i>.</p> <p><b>UniFirst Corporation</b>  UniFirst is a North American leader in the supply and servicing of uniforms, workwear, and protective clothing, currently outfitting more than 1.5 million workers each business day and helping to enhance the professional image of more than 225,000 businesses throughout the U.S. and Canada. The Company offers managed uniform and apparel service programs with rent, lease, and purchase options. As part of its image-enhancing services for businesses, UniFirst also offers Facility Service programs including floor mats, mops, and restroom products such as hand soaps, paper towels, and sanitary tissues. For more information, contact UniFirst at 800.455.7654 or visit <a href="http://unifirst.com">unifirst.com</a>.</p>