

# Reclaiming the lost industry standard of appearance

by MARK BRESLIN  
*Special Contributor*

**SOMEONE HAS TO SAY IT:** Our industry has clearly, totally and completely failed to set a standard for professional appearance on the jobsite.

Unpopular as it might be, and a perceived infringement on some people's personal statement of identity, the problem is obvious and must be dealt with.

This problem is not just obvious to anyone who visits most union construction jobsites. You can bet every owner and end-user has noticed, as well. It detracts from our market image of high value. It erodes the perception of what is a professional craftsperson. It reinforces the stereotypes of construction as a career direction for losers. It allows the individual, rather than the industry, to determine acceptable standards. It negatively affects worker self-esteem and identity. It is indulgent, unprofessional and unacceptable.

As a society, we have become more self-directed and narcissistic, believing, somehow, we are entitled to appear as we wish, whenever and wherever we go. In any given year, I will speak to tens of thousands of apprentices of every craft. Though many come with an eye to their appearance, many others come with a wholly different idea of what it means to look like a professional union craftsperson.

It is not unusual for me to now see:

- guys wearing hoodies indoors for the duration of a professional presentation;
- sunglasses indoors;
- baseball caps on backward or sideways, some with extended brims;
- jeans hanging between the belt-line and knees;
- shirts with slogans, logos or profanity;
- ripped or filthy clothes;
- notable jewelry worn outside of clothes;
- notable tattoos on neck and other clearly visible areas; and,
- facial and ear piercing of a dramatic nature.

Our industry has let this all get way out of hand.

It is my strong belief that self-identity starts with self-appearance. I don't want my banker in a Tommy Bahama shirt at work. I don't want a cop to show up at my house in a pair of flip-flops. No-one has to tell these guys what the standard is; they know it is part of the job. Why don't our guys?

Now is the time to revise our standards for professional appearance so every apprentice and journeyman understands what is acceptable, what is not and, perhaps most importantly, why?

It is my view that every apprentice in the United States and Canada should have either a uniform shirt or a strict dress code. I have been to numerous places around the country where it is a requirement that apprentices wear a blue denim short-sleeved shirt or similar that bears a union logo. I have been to at least one place where every craftworker in the local must wear white overalls or they cannot be dispatched.

In these places, the union members gripe about it. But, also in these places, the union members look professional. You can clearly tell them apart from their non-union counterparts.

I believe that when they put on something that makes them look good, and similar to their peers and contemporaries, their attitude is positively affected, and, thus, their self-identity.

I was quite surprised by a man who came up to me after a recent presentation I made to 300 union apprentices. He walked up and held out his



hand, palm up. In his palm were two large metal stud earrings and a ring that had most recently been in his lip. He had taken them all off.

"Mr. Breslin, I get it," he said. "I am a professional and I know I'm accountable. Until I heard you put that on me, I never thought about it."


It is that simple connection of professionalism with appearance that makes this seemingly small issue so important. If a union worker is going to make \$10-\$20 more per hour than the non-union counterpart, then she or he better look, act and perform better 100 percent of the time.

Management and labor need to confront this erosion of professionalism head-on. Give me every apprentice in the United States and Canada and let me put a basic shirt on him every day with a union logo and the words "High Performance, High Value Craftperson." Let's just see what that does not only for the image of our industry, but also the self-image of that union member.

If you know me, you've heard it before. "We have to reach their hearts and heads before their hands." The smallest things, even appearance, matter in this regard. ■




*Mark Breslin is a strategist and author specializing in labor-management challenges. He is the author of Survival of the Fittest, Organize or Die and Million Dollar Blue Collar.*



**Meccon Industries, Inc.**

**PROCESS & UTILITY PIPING**  
 Steam • Hydraulics • Fuels • Chemicals • Food



**EQUIPMENT INSTALLATION**  
 Pumps • Boilers • Exchangers • Tanks

**FABRICATION**  
 CS & SS Piping • Process Skids

---

**Meccon Industries Inc.**  
 Lansing, Illinois 60438-0206  
 Phone: (708) 474-8300 • Fax: (708) 474-8310  
 E-mail: info@meccon.com

## Workers' Compensation for Construction



**SeaBright provides the coverage and expert service contractors demand. Construction is our specialty.**

- Collectively Bargained Workers' Compensation for Union Contractors: A proven program to control claims costs through reduced litigation and faster claim closure
- OCIP and CCIP coverages including General Liability in selected states
- Marine Construction: A seamless program covering state act, USL&H and MEL under one policy
- Oil & Gas and Alternative Energy
- On-line tools for claim reporting, loss analysis and safety planning

For more information, contact your insurance broker or visit our website at [www.sbic.com](http://www.sbic.com)

SeaBright Insurance Company  
 Administrative Headquarters: Seattle, WA  
 Website: [www.sbic.com](http://www.sbic.com)  
 Service Offices: AK, AZ, CA, FL, GA, HI, IL, LA, PA, TX & WA  
 Website: [www.sbic.com](http://www.sbic.com)



**SeaBRIGHT**<sup>®</sup>  
 INSURANCE COMPANY  
 ...the Bright Choice in Workers' Compensation