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Autor: Baumann, Alice
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Uniformed Switzerland: a wind of change

Colourful, sporty and loose



As always, summer shows what's happening. Uniforms are not yet coming off, but they are changing.

Do the personnel who drive Berne's city trams, buses, and trains still really need to wear uniform?" The city council of Switzerland's capital actually posed this question as long ago as 1994. The answer was Yes. "Our people

Alice Baumann

are purveyors of information, and they also have to keep order", declared City Councillor Alfred Neukomm to justify the decision; "for the visiting cards of the capital are not the Clock Tower and the Bear Pit, but its uniformed officials."

The signs of the times were clear, and the fashion trend was in one direction only. As in so many other Swiss towns and cities, the municipal drivers of the city of Berne have now exchanged the severe woollen trousers, the stiff leather coat, the nylon shirt and the official cap with its badge of rank for easy-care and fashionably cut service uniforms.

Less material and less cost

One reason for putting the traditional uniform into mothballs is comfort pure and simple. Another good argument is the price. Modern uniforms are usually 30%–50% cheaper. At all events, providing hard-wearing uniforms represents a saving in itself: staff who direct traffic, deliver post, work in trains and aircraft, in hotels and hospitals, in forests and gardens, at conveyor belts

and in the army all appreciate freedom of movement and robustness. And in any case when their staff wear uniforms employers do not have to provide clothing allowances.

In addition, wearing a uniform gives a feeling of common purpose. The image consultancy firms which have recently sprung up like to emphasise this point. 'Image wear', for example, polished the appearance of the Swiss Olympic team in Atlanta.

Both athletes and officials appeared in the edelweiss design – they were walking advertisements for Switzerland. What goes for Olympic Games teams is also good for footballers. Instead of wearing trainers or indiscriminate leisure wear, they now fly to international matches wearing jackets and ties. And the coach wears the same clothes as he watches the game from the trainers' bench.

Clothes define people

Textile advertising agencies transform their staff into ambassadors for their companies. Thanks to 'team clothing', as uniforms are now often known, a firm can have the same identical style from its letter paper through its architecture right down to the clothes worn by its personnel. And those who wear them? "Only people who feel good in their clothes give the type of performance desired by an employer", says image consultant Philip von Gleichen.

Colour has even reached the railways

Clothes signals given out by Swiss Federal Railways (SBB) point in the

same direction. Fashionable blue uniforms and colourful accessories emphasise the new identity of the SBB. "We are moving ever farther away from the uniform look towards civilian clothes", says personnel officer Ruth Stucki.

With the new SBB uniforms, practical needs and aesthetic requirements go hand in hand. First came the new women's suits (designed by Ruth Gröninger) and then the men's (designed by Joseph Alain Scherrer). The new outfits take special account of people's figures. Since the SBB is legally obliged to supply all its employees with clothes, it has as many as 76 men's trouser sizes on its books!

As important as the logo

Berne fashion creator Marianne Milani also attaches great importance to the fit: "The first time I designed a collection for a brass band I learned that the sleeves had to be very wide indeed for the jacket to stay in its place when the band members raise their arms to play their instruments. A train driver has to have the same sort of freedom of movement when he raises a signalling lamp, for example."

And today's young people? They no longer wear frayed jeans or favour the grunge look like they did in the 70s and 80s. But they still have their uniforms. Brand names are in high demand. It has to be Calvin Klein right down to the underclothes. This is not particularly shocking for the public in general, but it makes a big hole in the wallet. ■