



As Girths Grow, Firms do Battle With Weight Bias; Saks a Leader in Attitude Alterations

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By Samantha Marshall

Sandra Lane certainly had her colleagues at Saks Fifth Avenue fooled.

In a training session designed to promote workplace diversity, employees who did not know her were shown a photo of the plus-size Ms. Lane and asked to provide a likely character sketch. They pegged her as a single back-office clerk in poor health, living out a lonely existence that revolves around books, a cat and food.

In fact, Ms. Lane, who is married, leads a busy life with family and friends and exercises regularly. Until recently, she also ran one of the largest accessories departments in Manhattan, which grosses millions in sales annually.

"The truth of Sandra's life crashes through the stereotype," says Jay Redman, vice president of service selling and training for Saks Fifth Avenue Enterprises, who led the workshop.

Sparking sensitivity

To combat such stereotypes, and the discrimination they can spark, a few companies such as Saks are beginning to offer sensitivity courses like the one involving Ms. Lane.

Risks of discrimination lawsuits aside, employers say creating a more comfortable environment for heavier-than-average workers and customers simply makes good business sense. With average American waistlines swelling, companies cannot afford to ignore such a wide segment of the population as a source of talented employees, any more than they can afford to shun it as a market.

Programs' shortcomings

However, even in New York City, home to employers that are among the most progressive in building workplace diversity, prejudices about obesity are rarely discussed. Deloitte & Touche, which covers a host of issues in its diversity training, doesn't specifically address weight.

"I don't know that physical appearance is something that is easy to address," says Thomas Hogan, a managing partner at Deloitte & Touche and co-chair of its tristate diversity program. "But we're working on it."

As one of the first firms to move in that direction, Saks stands as a model for how it can be done. The retailer completed a yearlong training program in September 2001 and has been reaping the business benefits ever since.

Pressure is beginning to mount for other companies, especially consumer-based businesses, to follow suit. Recent statistics indicate that 64% of American adults are overweight and 23% qualify as obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Meanwhile, research has found ample evidence of weight discrimination in both recruitment and pay. In one 1999 study, 15% of hiring managers admitted they would not hire an obese woman under any circumstances. In 1993, the New England Journal of Medicine reported that, on average, overweight women earn \$6,710 a year less than thin women.

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, individuals defined as clinically obese—those having a body mass index of 30 or more—can sue employers they believe have discriminated against them. But lawyers say the cases are hard to win.

While the legal risks for employers may be slight, there is growing awareness that weight discrimination has subtler and far greater costs.

Large-size clothing is one of the fastest-growing apparel segments in retail sales: Sales are growing three times faster than those for regular clothing, according to estimates by some analysts. Yet many high-end stores and chains continue to stick to rigid notions of their typical customers, rarely stocking expensive fashion items above size 10.

In part, the policy reflects the lack of diversity among store buyers.

"You can't have people who wear size 2 dresses making decisions for shoppers who average size 14," notes Luke Visconti, co-founder of Diversity Inc., a consultant that runs a Web site which tracks workplace diversity trends.

Saks Fifth Avenue missed out on at least \$1 million in potential sales a year because it had a certain look in mind for its core group of customers, according to Myrna Marofsky, president of ProGroup. The Minneapolis-based consultant, which provides training on a range of diversity issues using photo exercises, helped Saks complete diversity training for its 12,000 employees nationwide.

The wrong look

"They had in mind a desired customer who just didn't look like most people out there right now," says Ms. Marofsky.

Like bias against overweight customers, discrimination against fat workers can be difficult to confront: For example, people aren't likely to admit that job candidates or employees are being passed over because they're obese. "She's just not a good fit—you hear that over and over," says Ms. Marofsky.

Many bosses assume that a larger-than-average employee won't have the energy to complete a project. Others claim they can't put overweight staffers in front of clients, without explaining exactly why.

Before the diversity training at Saks, Mr. Redman says, overweight customers often complained that they felt unwelcome in departments outside of the chain's Salon Z for large-size fashions.

Taking extra care

Ms. Lane, who today runs the shoe department at Saks in Las Vegas, recalls one weekend when she went into her own store in Manhattan to buy gifts and felt that she was being ignored because of her size. In retrospect, Ms. Lane thinks she wasn't necessarily being judged on her

appearance, but because she'd had the experience in other stores so often, she was especially sensitive to any apparent slight.

Mr. Redman says that is why Saks needs to go to extra lengths to make heavier customers feel more welcome. For example, since implementing diversity training, the chain relocated Salon Z near the entrance to its stores instead of at the back, because customers didn't want to have to walk through the whole store. But the biggest change is in the outward attitude of Saks employees.

"Whether it's true or not that you treated these customers differently doesn't matter," Mr. Redman says. "If the perception is you did, you did."

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