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Better hide the tattoo if you want the job

As the use of body art grows, it's becoming an employment issue.

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Associate Coordinator Jheny Molina, left, and Whole Body Coordinator Justin Miloro look over blueprints for a Whole Foods store that is about to open, at Whole Foods offices in Sherman Oaks, Friday, May 18, 2007. (Ann Johansson / For The Times)

Last year Justin Miloro had to wear long sleeves to conceal the Buddha curling around his left forearm and the yellow-orange sun rays on his right. Pants covered the depiction of Earth on one leg and wings on the other. The sun spreading across his back was under wraps. The plugs in his earlobes were obscured by bandages.

"I thought it was really silly," Miloro recalled, "worse than seeing the tattoos."

This year he has nothing to hide — even though the 32-year-old worked last year for Whole Foods Market Inc. in Boston, where he was a salesclerk, and now works as a manager for the same company in Los Angeles, overseeing health and beauty products departments at 25 stores.

The chain has looser dress and grooming standards in some parts of the country than others. Setting degrees of tattoo taboos is how Whole Foods handles the increasing attraction to — though definitely not universal acceptance of — body art.

Once associated with drunken sailors, felons and Hells Angels, tattoos have gone nearly mainstream, putting employers in a bind. How to write rules that won't alienate un-hip customers on the one hand or eliminate talented workers on the other?

Different standards have emerged. A pink rose discreetly inked on an ankle might pass muster at a hospital but not a day-care center; an eyebrow stud will be viewed as charming at one store and a blemish at another.

In many cases, grooming policies are being set by members of a generation known for letting it all hang out.

"The baby boomers had hair out to the ceiling, cut jeans, ripped clothes that they washed sometimes," said Mark Mehler, co-founder of CareerXroads, a New Jersey recruiting and consulting firm.

And now boomers are passing judgment on nose rings.

The irony isn't lost on Fred Saunders, president and founder of FSPS Inc., which stages concerts and

productions for companies including Nintendo Co. and Walt Disney Co. Some of them demand clean-cut crews: trimmed sideburns, long hair pulled into ponytails, no detectable tattoos.

Of course, Saunders, 57, doesn't often take his shirt off during contract negotiations: On his back is a tattoo tableau featuring a samurai warrior skirmishing with a dragon.

"There's a shock value to the art," he acknowledged, and some people get a "negative vibe."

Nearly 50% of Americans between 21 and 32 have at least one tattoo or a piercing other than in an ear, according to a 2006 study by the University of Chicago and Northwestern University. Men and women alike say their tattoos make them feel sexy and rebellious, a 2003 Harris Poll found, while the unadorned of both genders see body art as unsightly and think those with tattoos and piercings are less intelligent and less attractive.

For Tumbleweed Day Camp in L.A., this divide can cause headaches. Although counselors' body art tends toward ladybugs or Asian characters for "luck," some parents complain that the inked and pierced don't look like appropriate role models. But Director John Beitner said that if he adopted a no-tattoo policy, he would lose excellent candidates for the camp's 120 counseling jobs.

Just 10 years ago, he said, only 5% of the staff had tattoos, and this summer it's close to 20%.

Beitner's solution: the is-it-offensive test, applied on a case-by-case basis. "A butterfly is not such a big deal," he said, but a skull and crossbones with blood dripping out of the eye sockets would be a problem. And sometimes Beitner does ask staffers to remove belly rings or tongue studs when they're at work.

Like many law enforcement agencies, the Costa Mesa Police Department takes a harder line than Tumbleweed Day Camp. The department's 162 officers can't display any tattoos or piercings while in uniform. The only exception is one stud per ear (hoops pose a safety risk).

"The big concern for us is professionalism," said Hugh Tate, who directs training and recruitment for the department.

Four years ago, the department didn't need a policy on body art. Then tattooed veterans of the war in Iraq began to apply for jobs. Unlike those from earlier wars, who embellished their upper arms with service insignias, many of these vets had vividly decorated their entire forearms.

Tate said the department had to turn them away. If they wanted to sue, claiming discrimination, they wouldn't get very far, because the law gives employers broad latitude to establish dress and grooming standards consistent with the images they want to convey.

Policies are all over the map. PricewaterhouseCoopers' says only that employees must wear "professional" attire, making no mention of ink. Employees at aircraft maker Boeing Co. can show off tattoos so long as the designs aren't what a spokesman called "offensive," but grocery workers at Vons are advised to totally cover up.

The dress code for Disney theme parks and resorts is among the most explicit and conservative: no visible tattoos, and the only permissible piercings are one per earlobe. Earrings must be "a simple matched pair in gold, silver or a color that blends with the costume," company spokesman Donn Walker said. Hoops can't be bigger than a dime.

Many law firms also prefer conventional looks, as Nicole Wool discovered. Six years ago, on her second day as an associate with an L.A. entertainment firm, one of the older partners took her aside and told her to take out her tongue stud.

"I felt so embarrassed," recalled Wool, 32, who now works for Dr. TATTOFF, a chain of tattoo removal studios. "It made me feel like I'd done something bad."

It isn't as easy to remove a tattoo, but John Wellman, 20, has heard too many potential employers in retail sales tell him that the image he projects is "not the image they're trying to send." So he's paying Dr.

Tattoo close to \$700 to erase the teardrop under his right eye, a memorial to deceased friends, and three small dots on his right hand.

Danielle Marcus, 22, also turned to Dr. TATTOFF to lose the star on the inside of her left forearm. The recent USC graduate said she worried that the star, inscribed in memory of her brother, who died three years ago, might "give off an air of unprofessionalism."

Dr. TATTOFF's chief executive, James Morel, estimated that 20% of the chain's clients undergo laser erasure treatments to improve their job prospects.

Financial planner Eric Cohen is having none of that. His boss at A.G. Edwards & Sons Inc. in Torrance is untroubled by the dragon that sometimes pokes out from Cohen's shirt cuff.

The 37-year old got the tattoo, which envelops his right forearm, in 1996 when he was working as a hotel concierge. "I still love it," he said.

When he interviewed with A.G. Edwards seven years ago, Cohen made sure to keep the dragon under wraps. He kept it covered during his first few years on the job.

Now, a string of solid performance reviews behind him, Cohen sometimes goes to work in short sleeves. "My boss is a relaxed kind of guy," he said. Besides, "it gets warm in here."