



# Food for Thought: **Should I Rent or Purchase Foodservice Uniforms?**

Strategies for building a  
cost-effective apparel program

# Should I Rent or Purchase Foodservice Uniforms?



## **About Cintas:**

Headquartered in Cincinnati, Ohio, Cintas Corporation provides highly specialized products and services to over 900,000 customers that range from independent auto repair shops to large hotel chains. Cintas leads the industry in supplying corporate identity uniform programs, providing entrance and logo mats, restroom supplies, promotional products, first aid, safety, fire protection products and services, and industrial carpet and tile cleaning. We operate more than 400 facilities in North America—including six manufacturing plants and eight distribution centers”.

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## Overview

Whether you run a fine dining restaurant, quick-service restaurant or foodservice operation in a school, office or nursing home, outfitting your employees in high-quality uniforms is key. Uniforms give employees a professional appearance and allow patrons to easily distinguish staff from guests. Uniforms also bring consistency to a foodservice establishment's workforce, from executive chefs to line cooks to servers. These garments can be customized for a brand, making them an important extension of a company's image.

Selecting the right garments will ensure that employees feel comfortable in their uniforms. In fact, garments should:

<b>GARMENTS SHOULD</b>	 Fit each individual properly	 Incorporate designs and features that improve wearer satisfaction and comfort	 Be laundered carefully to prolong their life	 Be inspected for damage regularly and retired if they are beyond repair
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From the numerous types of garments available to the different brands and sourcing programs, the options can easily overwhelm a business owner or manager. Before rushing to purchase front-of-house (FOH) and back-of-house (BOH) uniforms, ask yourself the following questions:



- 1 Do I have the time and energy to manage my own uniform program?
- 2 How dirty do my employees get and can they effectively remove the soils at home?
- 3 How rough are the employees on their garments?
- 4 Including retirement, how much employee turnover did we experience last year?
- 5 How many employees gained or lost weight and required new garment sizes?

There is no cookie-cutter approach to a uniform program. That's because a small, upscale steakhouse with 30 employees will likely have very different needs than an organization that outfits cafeteria workers for corporate campuses across the US.

It's important to develop a program that best fits the unique needs of your business. Understanding the options available and how those options impact the total cost of ownership (TCO) will make it easier for you to develop a five-star program.

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## What to look for in foodservice uniforms

Foodservice operations require various garments for kitchen workers, such as classic chef coats, pants and aprons for the executive chef, sous chef, pastry chef and chef de cuisine. Line and prep cooks may be fitted in chef shirts or coats with coordinating pants and aprons. Dishwashers require shirts and pants. Additionally, businesses may also want to provide shirts and pants for those working in server and porter roles, or at the very least, aprons that maintain a consistent image from FOH to BOH. Increasingly, more restaurants are opting for the open kitchen design, which transforms those working behind the scenes into customer-facing employees. These individuals must now look as put together as the servers who greet and wait on guests.

High-quality garments will ensure your employees feel comfortable and look professional. Consider the following when researching different uniform options:



### Soil release properties

While white is commonly worn in kitchens to showcase a clean, professional environment and a skilled chef, it also stains easily. Soil release properties that prevent stains from setting into the fibers of a garment are a valuable element of any foodservice uniform.



### Moisture wicking

Foodservice employees are hard at work in very warm environments, and sweating is inevitable. A lightweight moisture-wicking fabric allows cool air to flow to the body and prevents the wearer from becoming overheated. Add value to your uniform program with garments that have moisture-wicking panels in areas where sweat condenses, such as the underarm and collar areas.



### Breathable fabrics

Although a strong and durable garment is ideal in a foodservice environment, it should also be breathable to keep employees cool and comfortable. A poly-cotton blend provides a desirable balance: the polyester strengthens the garment, while the cotton allows increased breathability, which is especially important around hot grills, ovens and dishwashers.



### Quality craftsmanship

Foodservice uniforms should seamlessly combine high-quality materials, features and designs while still being comfortable enough for everyday wear. Design elements like cloth-covered buttons, chest pockets, double-breasted jackets and cohesive colours create symmetry and project professionalism among a culinary team.

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## A deeper dive into total cost of ownership (TCO)

Your uniform program should be cost-effective while also providing workers with clothing that is comfortable and well-suited for their job roles. Typically, workers are provided one set of garments for each working day for a total of five sets. Depending on the working conditions, these uniforms could be expected to last approximately one year. To accurately compare the cost of purchasing versus renting garments, you should consider the initial purchase price and factors that affect the wearable life of the garments to determine TCO.

So what components will affect the TCO of a purchase program? Ask yourself the following three questions:

### 1 What's the soil load?

Grease and oil can quickly and easily soil kitchen workers' garments. These contaminants also make employee uniforms difficult to clean, and using the incorrect cleaning compounds could damage the material.

If employees wash their uniforms at home, they may be unable to remove heavier soils, and as a result, discard garments that can't be cleaned (or garments they believe can't be cleaned). Even worse, employees may not regularly launder their garments, and unsightly grease, dirt and food stains can build up.

### 2 How much wear and tear will garments experience?

Some employees, especially those in more fast-paced roles like chefs or dishwashers, may be rougher on their uniforms than servers, given their different job responsibilities. Over time, regardless of the job role, tears, loose threading and colour fading can make employee garments appear worn. Periodically, these worn out uniforms will need to be replaced to maintain a consistent image.

### 3 What's the average turnover for employees?

Turnover is unavoidable and something you need to take into consideration when reviewing the TCO of your program. The foodservice industry in North America is especially prone to high turnover rates compared to other industries. However, foodservice roles are often viewed as temporary or supplemental jobs that are abandoned once an individual finds a different, higher-paying and less stressful job with a more regular schedule. This results in continual turnover and labour shortages for many foodservice establishments.

This turnover can quickly drive up the cost of a uniform program because it will force your business

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to retire an entire set of garments and purchase a new set for each additional new hire.

## On the menu: self-managed vs. managed

Garment laundering is an important component that can affect the total cost of a uniform program. There are several options to consider, including:



**A** Many foodservice operations ask employees to launder their own garments so that managers are only in charge of laundering things such as kitchen towels, cloth napkins and tablecloths. Although employees may be trusted to handle this task, that doesn't guarantee they will remember to launder their garments on a regular basis or will follow proper care instructions. Additionally, some stains can be difficult to fully remove from uniforms through home laundering. This can result in uniforms of varying cleanliness among staff, especially if some employees launder their uniforms at home and some use a local cleaner. Uniforms in various conditions ultimately impact the way your business presents itself to customers.

**B** Another option is to collect all dirty garments and send them to a local cleaner. However, regular dry cleaning can quickly drive up costs associated with the program and demand valuable time from managers who must ensure that drop offs and pick-ups are coordinated properly.

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**C** On the other hand, a managed rental program offers your foodservice operation several benefits, including:

## Image consistency

Image is a top priority in foodservice. Everything from the food to the atmosphere to employees' appearance directly impacts the guest's experience. Foodservice is also an intense day-to-day environment and leaders are extremely busy. A managed program simplifies uniform management by replacing dirty garments with clean garments weekly. A managed program also proactively repairs and replaces garments as needed to keep staff looking their best.

## Industrial strength stain removal

The machines available to consumers are not designed for commercial-level soils. Rental programs use industrial washers and dryers, which regulate water temperatures, water softness, cleaning agents and cycle times to effectively remove heavy kitchen soils.

## Reduced upfront cost

Although a strong and durable garment is ideal in a foodservice environment, it should also be breathable to keep employees cool and comfortable. A poly-cotton blend provides a desirable balance: the polyester strengthens the garment, while the cotton allows increased breathability, which is especially important around hot grills, ovens and dishwashers.

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## Questions to ask a uniform provider

Should you decide to rent, it's likely you will have many questions as you search for a uniform provider. To ensure you choose a provider that is well matched to your specific needs, ask the following questions:

### 1. What garments do you offer, and what is the quality of the garments?

Inquire whether the garments are name brand or unbranded. To encourage employees to wear the uniforms, they should also be comfortable. Ask about the range of motion the garments offer and key features that will benefit the wearer. The right provider will offer garments that are tailored to the end user and fit various job functions.

### 2. Are the garments retail versions, or are these built exclusively for an industrial laundry program?

Some uniform providers simply purchase retail garments and then incorporate them into rental programs. However, retail uniforms often perform poorly in industrial washers and dryers, so it is important to clarify whether the garment has been specifically manufactured for a rental program. Uniforms designed for rental programs will provide optimal washing performance and prolong the life of the garments.

### 3. How is the uniform provider's supply chain structured?

Determining how the uniforms are sourced will enhance overall quality assurance. A strong supply chain with distribution centers and local facilities also increases the likelihood that garments are available for the life of the program and simplifies and expedites ordering when size changes occur and new hires are brought on board.

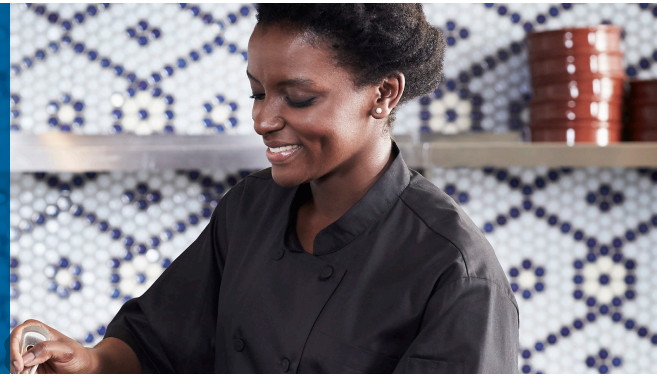
### 4. What documentation does the program provide?

A tracking system to ensure garments are picked up and delivered as requested is an essential tool that allows for clear communication. Find out if the provider sends detailed confirmation reports to their customers, such as pickup reports before the garments leave the customer's site or a service summary report that reviews what was picked up the week prior and is set to be dropped off.

### 5. How are the garments cared for and maintained? Are the correct laundry processes and formulas being used?

A credible provider will clean, inspect and repair garments according to style and soil level to protect their quality. Industrial washers and dryers will customize the appropriate levels of chemical, time and

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temperature, and incorporate detergents designed to address specific soil types. Garments should be dried with high heat to eliminate odours, bacteria and wrinkles. The garments should then be inspected for any issues, such as loose buttons, and repaired, if needed, before being sorted for return to the customer.

## 6. How would the representative describe the customer service model?

An in-depth understanding of a provider's customer service structure is essential should concerns or problems arise. Ideally, the provider will allow for consistent, weekly interaction with a trained representative who conducts pickups and drop-offs. In addition to the route representative, ask whether you will be assigned dedicated account contacts. You should also determine whether customer service is handled at a local facility or via an off-site call center.

## 7. What are the terms and conditions of the service agreement?

Obtain as much detail as possible about the terms of your service agreement. It will also be beneficial to know how price increases are handled and what service guarantees are in place that will enhance your program.

Not all uniform providers are created equal. By asking the above questions, you'll expand your focus from just the final program price. This is key, as there are many factors that go into a successful uniform program.

## Cooking up the perfect program

An easy way for foodservice operations to project a consistent and professional image is by outfitting employees in high-quality uniforms. The goal of any program is to keep costs manageable without sacrificing employee comfort and appearance. Although there is no one-size-fits-all solution, by analyzing the bigger picture and determining the TCO of uniform purchase and rental programs, you can determine the best fit for your business.

With a smart uniform program in place, your employees will be comfortable and feel like a welcome part of the team. Meanwhile, guests will be satisfied to be greeted and served by workers whose appearance is neat and professional.

**Cintas provides a variety of rental and purchase apparel programs for industries of all types. For help identifying a solution that works best for your business, [visit cintas.com](https://www.cintas.com)**