



Perhaps the highest compliment we can give to an individual or to an organization is to say that it is professional. But what does that mean? In the golf world, one definition revolves around payment: professional golfers get paid, amateur golfers do not. But that definition does not apply when talking about people doing their jobs and organizations offering services to customers.

In this article, we are going to look at this issue from two perspectives, from that of the manager or owner, and from the point of view of individual employees. What does professionalism mean, and how do you convey a professional image?

Management Perspective

If you manage a facility or operate a business, how do you let the world know that you are running a professional operation? Basically, managers have to do two things: provide direction to staff and learn to think like a customer. Let's take a look at these two requirements more closely.

Provide Direction

1. Set standards. What kind of service would you like your customers to receive? This is far too important a question to be left up to individual employees to answer in a variety of ways, yet that's often what managers do.

Managers sometimes expect their employees to know intuitively what constitutes a professional approach to work. How many times should the phone ring before it is answered? How should customers be greeted? What should you do if the phone rings while you are helping another customer? These are just a few examples of the types of questions which managers need to address in order to provide direction to their employees.

Have you ever heard a person say something like, "When you go there, don't speak to Mary, ask for Fred. He's much more helpful." If it makes a difference to whom you talk, that's usually a sign that the operation does not have consistent service standards.

General statements such as "be nice to people" or "give great service" are a start but it's much more helpful to employees to have specific direction and definitions of what is expected of them and what the public can expect when they deal with a member of your staff.

2. Recognize and teach service skills. The ability to maintain a consistently professional and positive approach to work is a special skill. Not everyone is good with numbers or at writing reports. The same is true of professionalism. It is not easy to continue smiling or remain pleasant through an entire day's work. It's not easy to deal with difficult people (and some of them are very difficult) and not get upset. It requires very special skills to turn an angry, complaining person into a satisfied customer who will return with a more positive attitude.

When placing employees in front line positions, managers should look for people who seem suited to customer service work. And, most important, managers should ensure that employees receive the training they need to enable them to do their jobs properly. Most managers would never dream of hiring someone to operate a piece of equipment without first making sure that the person either knew how to operate it or was given training. People are frequently hired for front-line, customer contact positions with no training – just a vague expectation that somehow they intuitively will know how to handle every situation that occurs.

Organizations noted for their professionalism place a high value on employee training, both during orientation and as an ongoing practice. Everything from the

basics, such as positive communication techniques and telephone skills, to more complex issues such as diffusing customer anger are important for staff to team.

3. Value your front-line staff. If customers are the most important part of any operation, then the staff who work directly with customers are also very important people.

Ironically, it is usually the lowest paid, lowest seniority, often part-time or seasonal people who have the greatest customer contact. Except in very small businesses, the most senior people are usually the furthest removed from day-to-day customer contact.

It is essential for managers to show their front line staff how important they are to the success of the organization. There are many ways to recognize and reward positive attitudes and professional work and to show people that you value what they do. Management's attitude toward employees translates directly into employees' attitudes towards customers. Employees must genuinely appreciate the importance of making each interaction with customers a positive one and they must understand the impact that their actions have on the reputation of the organization.

Think Like a Customer

If you want to be perceived positively by the customer, it is essential to start thinking like your customers. They often see your operation from a very different perspective. In general, customers tend to evaluate six things. What does professionalism look like to your customers? Ask yourself these questions.

a) Physical environment: what does your operation look like? This includes things like offices, buildings, trucks, equipment, signage, grounds, parking – just about every element of your physical set-up. Do things look well maintained, clean, organized, neat?

b) Interpersonal interaction: what is it like dealing with your staff? Are they pleasant, knowledgeable, positive? Do they give the impression that they know what they are doing and have been trained?

c) Information: how easy or difficult is it to get information? How many different people do you have to talk to get answers? Are you ever told, “I don’t know, that’s not my department”?

d) Systems, processes, procedures: how easy or difficult is it to do business with you? Do you reserve tee times? How long do you wait to get a phone call returned?

Do you take debit? Do your brochures look good and is everything spelled correctly?

e) Deliverables: what is the quality of the product or service which you provide? Does the field look good? Are the greens in good shape?

f) Perceived value: for what it cost, what is my impression of the overall value of what I received?

Individual Perspective

What does it mean for an individual employee to be “professional”? When asked that question, most people give these answers.

- Knowledgeable and competent: you have to know what you are doing.
- Ethical: it is difficult to say someone is professional if they are not honest.
- Confident: in addition to looking confident, it is important to instill confidence in others.

• High standards: professionals always try to do the best possible job; “good enough” is never good enough.

• Communicate: it’s not enough to be knowledgeable, it is also important to be able to explain things to the average person without sounding condescending.

• Work under pressure: it’s one thing to be knowledgeable and confident and positive on the good days, but can you do it on the bad days? That is the essence of professionalism. Too many people use the fact that they’re having a bad day as an excuse for less than professional behavior.

Projecting a Professional Image

How do you let the world know that you are a professional and that they can count on you? Here are some ideas.

1. Communication skills: According to some research studies, over 90% of the image we convey to others is conveyed through body language and tone. Avoid using body language and tone which could

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be perceived as sarcastic or uncaring. Some examples might include rolling your eyes, frowning or scowling, shrugging your shoulders as if you don't care, sighing, using a tone of voice which could be interpreted as condescending or impatient. Remember to stand up straight (posture counts!), smile, make eye contact, and generally look like you are happy to be doing the job you are doing and happy to be serving the customers.

2. Use positive language: There is a real art in learning to use positive words rather than negative ones. Try to avoid as much as possible using words such as *can't*, *don't*, *won't*. They give the impression that you are trying to dodge responsibility and that you really are not interested in working with the person. Try to get into the habit of using positive words instead. So, instead of saying, "I can't answer that," try saying "What I can do for you is put you in touch with Rob, he'll be able to answer that for you." Or instead of saying, "I don't know, I'm new here" try saying "Let me check on that and get right back to you."

3. Handle difficult situations in a competent, professional manner: There will be difficult days when things don't go right and people get upset. Knowing what to do and say when people get upset is an essential skill. This is a complex issue and the best recommendation is to learn as much as possible about how to handle various situations. There are lots of courses, books and videos available on the subject – check out the library, local college, or your own organization's training programs. If none seem to be available,

ask your manager about having an in-house course.

Here are some basic tips. The natural human tendency when someone brings us a problem is to become defensive. This is absolutely the worse thing you can do. Saying things like "It wasn't me," or "I didn't do it" just make people angrier. Always focus immediately on the problem and what you are going to do about it.

Don't take it personally. The person is not angry with you, they are angry with the situation. You are the target, not the cause. Saying something like, "Just hang on a minute, you can't yell at me like that" is simply an invitation to turn things into an argument between the two of you. Again, focus on the problem not the person.

Some people can complain and still remain civil. Others can get downright rude and start shouting and swearing. You are not a punching bag and don't have to take abuse but it is never okay to start yelling and swearing back. That is unprofessional. Don't get sucked into playing the rude person's game.

4. Maintain a professional focus in everything you do. Your professionalism is measured not only by what you say but in how you conduct yourself as you go about your day's work. Keep your office or work area neat and tidy. Papers and tools spread all over the place don't create a very positive impression. If you have voice mail, keep it up to date by changing your message every day and returning calls promptly. Treat everyone with whom you come in contact with respect. Don't fall into the trap of "sizing" people up and

deciding what service they deserve. True professionals do their very best for every situation and every person with whom they come in contact. Finally, honour commitments. If you say you will do something, then do it.

5. Project a professional appearance and demeanour. This includes using appropriate language (no swearing, avoid slang) and body language (watch your posture). Grooming and personal appearance are important as well: hair combed, clothes clean and neat. If you are given a uniform to wear, then make sure it is kept in good condition. If you can wear your own clothes to work, the general rule of thumb is this: if you want to be taken seriously and respected, then look like you deserve to be. Golf course dress codes are great guidelines for what looks professional: shirts with collars, real shoes (not sandals), no cut-offs, no slogans on shirts, hats on straight, etc.

Professionalism has nothing to do with academic credentials, years of experience or job title and function. It is the way in which you conduct yourself and your approach to the work you do. Whether you are a business owner, a facility manager, a full time employee or a seasonal employee hired for the summer, you can let the world know you and your operation are professional. ♦

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