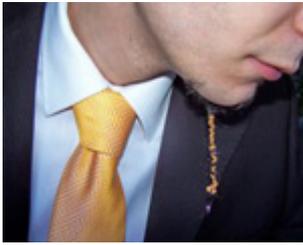


What is Professional?

What is "professional", and how is one professional and what is considered unprofessional?



A question I hear or read often is, "is that professional enough"? What is "professional", and how is one professional and what is considered unprofessional?

The actual definition of "professional" is "Of, relating to, engaged in, or suitable for a profession: lawyers, doctors, and other professional people." Or "Conforming to the standards of a profession: professional behavior."

When considering whether a service or location is professional, a great response comes from the dictionary again, which defines professional as "A skilled practitioner; an expert." I have met many skilled practitioners who are not very professional. I have met many experts who I don't initially consider a "professional", but who convey a very professional and confident image.

Sounds confusing, huh? Yes. In my opinion, a professional person is one who can convey their message or provide their service in a manner appropriate for his/her clientele. When I worked at the hospital, we were required to dress in "appropriate professional dress", but if we worked in the clinics, we were encouraged to not overdress. We understood this to mean to not make the clientele feel uncomfortable about their own dress, but be "professional" enough so we were not wearing tube tops and mini skirts.

When considering what creates a professional image, we must look at two things; our appearance and how we act. Let's now look at these two topics.

Dress

I still laugh when I think of one of the first topics covered in class when I started my dietetics program; it was on how to dress, wear our hair, and so forth. I even remember the suggestion to wear glasses, just for the studious appearance it gave us.

But the bottom line is this: When you attend networking events or seminars, what is the impression you wish to convey to others? The message you want to pass on about yourself will be reflected in how you dress and present yourself. For anyone in business, every person you come into contact with is a potential client or referral source, and when this is most important is at networking or business functions.

When considering professional dress, it's not just the style that is important. You must also pay attention to color, fabrics, fit, and accessories. Trends are good to follow, but keep in mind the message you are trying to send. Extra-long sleeves, short skirts and thick soles may be trendy and fun to wear at casual events, but is that the appropriate message in a business setting? The next event you attend, look around the room at how people are dressed. Then observe their demeanor, interaction in the event, and what they say and how they say it.

Several months ago I attended a marketing seminar. Most of us dressed in what is today known as "business casual". Except for one woman; she wore sweats... She was out of place and was not conveying a message of power. I noticed that people did not go out of their way to talk to her, either.

Does this mean that we must always wear a jacket? Not always. However, according to Professional Image Consultant (<http://www.professionalimagedress.com/>), there are six occasions that all women do benefit from wearing a jacket. These include;

1. When meeting a client for the first time.

2. When giving a presentation.
3. When attending meetings.
4. During an interview (including being interviewed by someone).
5. If you work in an office where clients drop in.
6. When you appear in court.

Accessories

Without sounding like my old professors who lectured us on hair, make-up, perfume, and jewelry, let me make a few comments about each, because these accessories play a big role in how professional we appear to others. All should be low-key and complementary to our dress, coloring and body type. People should not look at your hair and wonder how you got that color (in a bad way), or wish they could escape from you because the perfume is so strong. Your lip or nail color should not create a topic for conversation. All of these should be subtle additions to your total image. Yes, we want to be stylish and current, but not to the point that we are inappropriate for our setting or audience.

Business etiquette

Your appearance is important, but just as important is how you act and interact with others. If you are dressed to send a message of power and credibility, your actions must support your visual appearance. I have no doubt that every professional reading this article knows their area of specialty. It's your delivery that will make the difference, however. In fact, 70% of what others believe about you, personally and professionally, is based on your image and your professional presence.

What exactly is business etiquette? Etiquette is about presenting yourself with the kind of polish that shows others you can be taken seriously. It is about being comfortable around people and helping them become comfortable around you. It is showing your self-confidence, or at least appearing self-confident.

Business etiquette is being courteous and thoughtful to those around you. It involves the little things, such as how to address a person, how to introduce people, punctuality, returning phone calls, avoiding interruptions, showing an appropriate level of formality or informality, engaging in adequate small talk to calm a new client, or avoiding it completely.

Your professional image will continue to be impressed on clients if your billing and services are organized and consistent. Do you have a billing form? Do you have a policy to call new clients as a reminder of first appointment? Are potential clients able to leave a message if they call and you are not available? And, do you return calls promptly? Are you able to give your undivided attention to that person when you see them, regardless of the setting? These are all very important aspects of sending a professional image to clients or potential clients, regardless of where you see clients.

In networking situations, collect cards from others and make notes on the back of the cards, so you are able to remember something specific about them. If they call you for your services, you can look on the back of their card and recall something about them in your conversation. That one little step could lead to a new client, AND future referrals. If you tell someone you meet at such an event that you will do something, make sure you follow through. If you treat people as you would like to be treated, you will never go wrong.

Ultimately, it is the message you want to convey by your interaction and appearance, and the quality of service you provide that will give your clients the sense that they are working with a professional. You can project a very credible, reliable, serious, professional image just as much in a health club setting, yoga studio, coffee shop or a private home (yours or the client's) as you can in an office setting. It's not the location that will make the impression of what you have to offer, but you and that first impression. Your clients will remember what you did to help them achieve their goals more than they will ever remember exactly what jacket you wore to your first visit.

Short note about the author

Marjorie Geiser from www.megfit.com

Author: Margie Geiser

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