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Professional Image

AT THE CORE

This topic examines:

- THE CONCEPT OF A PROFESSIONAL IMAGE
- ATTRIBUTES OF A PROFESSIONAL IMAGE
- THE IMPORTANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF A PROFESSIONAL IMAGE
- THE EFFECTS OF A PROFESSIONAL IMAGE ON SELF-CONFIDENCE
- DEVELOPMENT OF A PROFESSIONAL IMAGE

It may seem somewhat unfair to judge an individual by appearance and behavior rather than exclusively on performance; but in most business environments, judgments are made about people based on the professional image they display as a result of appearance and behavior. This occurs before the individual's level of competence or performance is determined. Judgments are made about people both internal and external to the organization as they interact with people. Consequently, the significance of professional image can be substantial in the business world, and you should be aware of this as you develop your personal standards for appearance and behavior.

*"Nothing succeeds like the appearance of success."
—Christopher Leach*

Although some standards of appearance for professional dress have changed over the last decade, certain expectations remain for appropriate and professional appearance in the business environment. The business world is still more conservative than liberal in its regard

for professionalism. You should seize the opportunity to distinguish yourself positively in a sometimes lax environment by adopting high standards in your professional appearance. This could be a significant factor in your career advancement.

In the business environment, you must understand what constitutes a professional image in order to effectively meet the standards and expectations you set for yourself. In addition, you must recognize the importance of a professional image and how this affects self-confidence; interaction with peers, customers, and supervisors; and ultimate success in your career mobility. Professional image can be viewed from two major perspectives: appearance and personal behavior. In the area of appearance, you want to develop your ability to dress appropriately and present yourself in an attractive manner. In the area of personal behavior, you want to develop your communication skills and your finesse in the use of proper manners and etiquette as well as recognize the importance of appropriate personal behavior. Finally, you should identify resources for image development so you are aware of and can maintain a professional image throughout your career.



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"Looking the part helps get you the chance to fill it."

—Macolm Forbes

The Concept of a Professional Image

Exactly what is a professional image? Is it how you dress? Your grooming? The quality or cost of your clothing? What creates an individual's professional image? "Your professional image is the image you project in the professional business world."¹ A professional image is an overall concept that is a composite of many aspects of your appearance.

Professional image consists of personal appearance with regard to clothing, grooming, manners and etiquette, personal behavior, and communication effectiveness.

Attributes of a Professional Image

The four main attributes of a professional image include:

- Appropriate professional appearance.
- Use of correct manners and etiquette.
- Appropriate personal behavior.
- Effective communications.

Each of these attributes has many aspects in your achieving the overall appropriate and positive image you desire. It is important to pay attention to detail and to remember at all times that your professional image is a composite of both your appearance and your behavior.

Appropriate Professional Appearance. Professional appearance is a composite of your professional dress and your grooming. The message communicated is a result of the combination of these two factors. Professional dress can be defined as dressing in such a manner as to enhance your authority, promote your respect, aid in your promotion, and promote your advancement opportunities in the workplace. Professional dress involves appropriate clothing selection based on the following considerations:

- Profession
- Company policies
- Level of customer and client interaction
- Geographic location
- Clothing care and maintenance
- Appropriate styles for your individual body
- Types of functions you must attend
- Budget and purchasing techniques

Each of these will be presented in greater detail later in this module; however, you can see from the list that achieving an appropriate professional appearance requires time and careful thought in the achievement of the desired result.

Personal grooming habits are also very important in your professional image. You must develop and practice good grooming habits to ensure that your appearance is clean and polished in your professional role. Grooming involves all aspects of your body, including the following:

- Overall cleanliness
- Hair
- Nails
- Teeth
- Makeup

Manners and Etiquette. Your professional image is also communicated through your use of appropriate manners and etiquette. You should be familiar with the different protocols of behavior as they relate to social manners and etiquette. Some of these include:

- Making introductions and appropriate greetings.
- Being able to initiate and maintain conversations.
- Respecting the customs of others.
- Being able to express appreciation.
- Knowing appropriate dining rules and protocol.
- Extending courteous behavior to others.
- Knowing how to behave in difficult situations.

Manners and etiquette are important in the overall professional image you project. You can learn to be proficient in these areas and enhance your professional image with practice and attention in determining the etiquette requirements for different situations.

Most people feel comfortable once they are sure about what is expected and know how to carry out these expectations. Many resources are available to help you develop this aspect of your professional image.

TIP Your personal behavior also communicates a message about your professional image.

Personal Behavior. As a professional, you want to practice a code of personal behavior that demonstrates respect for your organization and the people who work with you. You should recognize that personal behavior contributes to the overall professional image you project. Some aspects of personal behavior include:



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- Respecting the organization and its rules.
- Being a loyal employee.
- Conducting business in an ethical manner.
- Assuming responsibility.
- Respecting the diversity of people.

Each of these aspects of personal behavior is very important in the business world, and your reputation for being committed to them will be established early in your career. You should give careful attention to personal behavior. Many people have been high achievers who projected an appropriate image in their appearance and yet failed in their career because they did not take responsibility for their personal behavior.

Communications. Another significant component of your professional image is your ability to communicate effectively with others. Communication should be clear, concise, and accurate. You communicate nonverbally as well as verbally in the business world. Nonverbal communications send messages about your professional image. These nonverbal communications include the following:

- Posture
- Facial gestures
- Neatness
- Listening
- Personal behavior
- Punctuality

For example, a person who is usually late may not say “I don’t respect your time,” but that is certainly the message that is communicated through this nonverbal action.

In addition to nonverbal communications, your overall ability to communicate effectively is very important. Effective communications required in the business environment include the following:

- Speaking correctly.
- Writing appropriate communications.
- Expressing written appreciation.
- Listening effectively.
- Communicating verbally in difficult situations.

Communication abilities can be developed and refined as you progress through your career. It is important to give significant attention to the development of these skills as they not only contribute to your professional image but also may determine the level of advancement you attain in your career.

TIP The ability to communicate effectively is a major attribute of a positive professional image.

The Importance and Significance of a Professional Image

The importance and significance of a professional image should not be underestimated. “The way you look may not make up for poor performance, but it could give you a competitive edge during your interview and in your future career. Employers often decide whether an applicant will fit in with their organization based on a first impression.”² This statement reflects the importance of a professional image in the business world. The effect on your career can be significant and varied and may include:

- Selection for participation on project teams.
- Inclusion in social settings with customers or clients.
- Selection for presentations.
- Promotions to positions of greater responsibility.
- Performance rating.
- Overall competitiveness in numerous situations.

“Some of the perceptions people can form solely from your appearance are professionalism, level of sophistication, intelligence, and credibility. Whether these perceptions are real or imagined, they underscore how your appearance instantly influences the opinions of strangers, colleagues, and superiors. The benefits of being well dressed in a corporate setting can reap many rewards, including respect, and, all things considered, promotions.”³

The significance of a professional image may seem unfair, but it is a real and substantial factor in the business world nonetheless. You may find many issues to be less than fair, but they do indeed exist in the business world. Most business environments have expectations for the professional image of their employees; this alone should indicate to you the importance of image, as it will impact opportunities for your advancement in the business world. You should consider your professional image as a significant “communicator” to others. Success in the business world is usually a result of job knowledge, human relations abilities, and professional image. Most people want to communicate to their peers, supervisors, and customers that they are ready for business, they are prepared for their role, and they possess the competence to perform their job. Your professional image does all of this.



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The Effects of a Professional Image on Self-Confidence

The effect of a professional image on your career and your interaction with others can be significant. Your professional image not only affects how others react and interact with you but also affects your self-confidence and performance. When you believe you are dressed appropriately, know the required protocol, and are comfortable communicating with others, you tend to feel a heightened sense of self-confidence because you know what to do and how to do it. This sense of self-confidence can positively influence your performance. In addition to your increased self-confidence, others around you perceive your professionalism in a positive manner and, consequently, believe you are able to perform your job in a satisfactory manner.

Gaining the Respect of Others. You also gain the respect of others by projecting a positive professional image. This respect is important, as people observe you and form opinions about your professional image. Many times throughout the course of a day's work you will be observed and evaluated in an informal manner. These observations contribute to the overall perception that people have about you. Supervisors and peers make judgments, choices, and decisions based on these observations over a period of time.

TIP You only have one opportunity to make a first impression.

First Impressions. In initial job interviews, judgments are made on your professional image, your manners, and your communication abilities. These judgments result in decisions about whether you are the best candidate for a position. The importance of professional image as it relates to first impressions and career mobility is significant and should be considered at all times. You only have one opportunity to make a good first impression. Take this opportunity seriously, and concentrate on making a positive first impression. "Your image can smooth your way or stop you cold. With great effort, you can usually overcome a bad first impression, but why waste the time? Start right, start strong, and your image will be your most powerful advocate, telling people who and what you are as you connect with them and get your message across."⁴

Development of a Professional Image

Given the many aspects of a professional image, you may wonder where you can learn about professional image and find answers to questions that may be difficult or embarrassing to ask others. Many resources are available to enhance both your knowledge and performance in developing a professional image. Some resources include the following:

- Literature
- Online resources

- Consultants
- Mentors and role models
- Training and professional development opportunities
- Company policies and procedures

Each of these can assist you in developing a professional image, and each one has unique advantages over the other. Most professionals have used these resources at one time or another to create their desired professional image. You may use the Pre-Assessment Activity at the beginning of this module to conduct an assessment of the areas you desire to improve with regard to your professional image knowledge base.

You should identify the resources that are most appropriate for your individual needs. However, the observation of others is one of the most powerful learning tools for a professional, and this is especially true in the area of professional image. Look around and see what other successful professionals are wearing, how they communicate, and what rules of etiquette they are following. This can provide valuable information as you seek to develop your professional image.

RECAP OF KEY CONCEPTS

- ◆ The business world makes judgments about you based on your professional image.
- ◆ The business world has certain expectations for appropriate and professional appearance in the business environment.
- ◆ Professional image consists of personal appearance as it relates to clothing, grooming, manners and etiquette, personal behavior, and communication effectiveness.
- ◆ Professional appearance is a composite of your professional dress and your grooming.
- ◆ Professional dress is dressing in such a manner as to enhance your authority, promote your respect, aid in your promotion, and promote your advancement opportunities in the workplace.

- ◆ Professional dress involves appropriate clothing selection based on profession, company policies, level of customer interaction, geographic location, clothing care and maintenance, appropriate styles, types of functions, and budgetary resources available.
- ◆ Personal grooming involves your hair, nails, teeth, and make-up.
- ◆ Use appropriate manners and etiquette for making introductions, maintaining conversations, respecting the customs of others, expressing appreciation, knowing appropriate dining rules, extending courteous behavior, and knowing how to behave in difficult situations.
- ◆ Personal behavior is an important part of the professional image you project.
- ◆ Nonverbal communications include posture, facial gestures, neatness, listening, personal behavior, and punctuality. Each of these contributes to professional image.
- ◆ Effective communication includes speaking correctly, writing, expressing appreciation, listening effectively, and communicating effectively in difficult situations.
- ◆ Your professional image can have a significant impact on your career. This can be demonstrated in your selection for participation in company activities, your promotion potential, and your performance ratings.
- ◆ Your professional image also affects your self-confidence and performance.
- ◆ Many resources are available to assist in the development of a professional image. These include literature, online resources, consultants, mentors and role models, training and professional development opportunities, and company policies and procedures.