

Why Professionalism Matters

Christopher G. Nowak

What is professionalism? Most people have difficulty defining it, but most of us can recognize the professional qualities in people we admire in our career. Does professionalism matter? *Absolutely!* Professionalism can define for your customers who you are in your career. Have you ever heard the expression, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression?”

When I asked my coworkers “What is professionalism?” I received responses such as dressing appropriately for your role, being a good role model, modeling good behavior, speaking appropriately without using a condescending or patronizing tone, working well under pressure, being knowledgeable, and having good personal hygiene.

You get the point. We all know people in the workplace who possess these qualities. But goodness, gracious, what does how I comb my hair, write or speak have to do with the way I repair a clinical device? Well, those qualities may not directly affect the way we fix a device, but they do relate to the way we “fix” the customer.

Every repair has a personal component to it, some more than others. Our career choice places us in some very stressful situations, where our customers have the weight of the world—or at least the health of the patient—on their shoulders. It is part of our job as the service person to also ensure that the customer is “fixed” along with the repair. We need to assure the customer that the repair was done correctly and with care so that he or she has confidence in returning the device to service.

We must create a healing atmosphere through our first impressions with the customer. The overall impression you make begins, and sometimes ends, with your appearance. If you think that long hair on men, exposed tattoos with personal meanings or profanity, tattered clothing, greasy hair, body odor, and other negative appearances or hygiene do not mean anything, think again.



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I recently had an experience where personal appearance created new opportunities for my clinical engineering (CE) team. Our magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) service had been outsourced to an original equipment manufacturer (OEM) since I first arrived at the facility. I always wanted the opportunity to provide service for this modality, but the OEM was entrenched with the manager of this area. That changed when the OEM's service engineer decided to grow his hair long. He offered the reason that it was for a donation to “Locks of Love,” a nonprofit organization that uses human hair to make wigs for cancer sufferers. After one year of hearing this story, the hospital MRI manager became frustrated with the service engineer's appearance. This created an opportunity for my team to take the lead in servicing these devices. The OEM service team lost more than \$500,000 in service revenue since other contracted items were affected.



The moral to the story: Your actions, personal hygiene, communication skills, professionalism, or lack thereof, have consequences. Some of these consequences can be very expensive for your employer.

Of course, appearance is not everything. You can look like a professional, but if your work is not professional, you'll be found out, too.

Are you presenting your customers with the whole professional package? Continuing education, certification, professional society participation, personal hygiene, and communication skills are all part of the package.

Now, go make it a great experience for your patients! ■

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