

How to Project a Professional Image

As a professional, you project an image to employers and staff. Projecting the right image could help the response to your company and products and earn some extra respect from your employees. Projecting the wrong business image could undermine your efficiency and credibility.

Communicate

All business is based on communication between people inside and outside the organization. How you communicate will affect the way people regard you. At the end of the day, you want your point to be heard and acted upon, so use positive language wherever possible.

You will almost always be able to find a positive way to say something. For example: "I think your suggestions are unworkable" could be changed to: "That's an interesting suggestion -- have you thought of a different way this could be achieved?"

It is important to use an evidence base to back up your arguments -- statistics add weight but make sure they are accurate and up to date. Only use them when you want to stress a point; if you use them too frequently, they lose impact.

To add weight to a point, refer to other respected organizations, such as the Health and Safety Executive, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence or other government departments or professional experts.

Write-on

Much can be gleaned from written communication, even just a short e-mail. Use the spell-checker on all documents (including e-mails) but be aware that it cannot replace knowledge of English grammar and spelling. Re-read any documents before sending them off to double check your accuracy.

It is also important to be timely in your responses -- a powerful e-mail loses power if it is a week late. Also, have the necessary trimmings available -- business cards, compliment slips, headed paper, e-mail signatures and disclaimers.

Talk the Talk

It is important to build a relationship with work colleagues. To do this, you must an appropriate amount of interest in the other person. With so much verbal communication taking place by phone, it is important to remember that the person on the other end cannot see your face, so choose your words carefully as they cannot be tempered by your facial expression.

Your opening phrase is significant, so ensure you answer the phone professionally -- a greeting, your company name and your name are usually sufficient. Also, your professionalism will be questioned if your phone is either always diverted to voicemail, you take too long to answer or you do not respond quickly to voice messages.

Conversely, if you are in face-to-face discussions with a colleague, put your phone on divert to ensure you are not interrupted, as taking a call mid-way through gives the impression that the current discussion is not as important.

Actions

Getting people to hear what you say is all well and good, but you need to follow up with actions. Do what you promise you will do, by the time you said you would. If people promise to do things for you, chase them up if they haven't done so by the appropriate time, otherwise this will set a precedent for future actions.

If you are asked to do something, ensure you know what is expected from you and when you need to complete the task. Keeping to deadline and your word are both essential, but remember you can say 'no'.

Control your Emotions

The easiest way to lose your professional image is to be inappropriately emotional. Getting angry, displaying overt disgust or fear, crying and shouting are all to be avoided.

You are bound to feel these emotions at some point in your career and if you do, take leave of your colleagues and do it in private. Even using words such as 'unfair' in business can be viewed as too emotional.

Check your Appearance

Wear clothes appropriate to your business culture -- over-dressing looks showy, and under-dressing looks disrespectful. Ensure your work area also reflects your professionalism. A family picture on your desk is acceptable, but dozens of cuddly toys and photos of your pet in a variety of poses do not portray the right image.

Finally...

Everyone makes mistakes. Owning up to them with an apology is important. You could be marked down heavily if you do not, but if you offset your confession with a suggestion for future corrective action, this could even be seen as a plus.

A professional business image is hard to achieve, but so easily lost. Value it, maintain it and nurture it always.

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