**Professional Etiquette, build your career on it!**

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There is a work culture expectation, even if nobody on your team takes the time to explain it to you. Seems a bit ironic, your team and management anticipate you to act as a professional, but rarely is Professional Etiquette defined. That is precisely why we will be discussing it now.

Regardless of your work environment, there are common guidelines establishing behavior in the workplace.  Consider Professional Etiquette when making a first impression (which you are constantly making!), engaging with clients and team members, writing formal (even informal) communications and dealing with confidential client and patient information. Embrace these few concepts in Professional Etiquette to build your career in veterinary medicine.

“In spite of its importance, we rarely ask ourselves how professionalism develops. We don’t ask how people become professional. We simply take it for granted that almost everyone does, in fact, become professional. We seem to assume that professionalism is somehow inculcated in each of us as an integral part of our upbringing. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Perhaps the most striking thing about professionalism is that people need a definition to recognize it but don’t need anything at all to recognize its absence.” as reported in *Professionalism; The Decline of a Critical Set of Behaviors*.

**What is Professional Etiquette?**

It seems to be a simple question, but it has a variety of connotations. Professional Etiquette may refer to manners at a dinner meeting, the qualities an employer is looking for in a new team member or the social skills needed to be successful in organized medicine. Regardless of the situation, being aware your social graces and the presence you wish to portray will support a satisfying career. “Etiquette allows you to present yourself in a polished, professional and polite way. It encourages others to take you seriously,” writes Kristie Lorette, *Business Etiquette and Professionalism*.

In a recent study performed by the York College, their research revealed that fewer than half of all businesses have programs the specifically address professionalism for new employees. Over 90% of human resource professionals and managers surveyed believe that colleges, not businesses, should be responsible for the development of professionalism**.**

**Thus, the GAP**. Who is responsible for instilling professionalism in employees: parents, schools, educators or businesses? Unfortunately, the burden falls on businesses because that is where the rubber hits the road in team delivered services in a professional manner.

**Expectations**

You are here because you want to be pro-active in your development as a professional. GOOD FOR YOU! You may already understand success in your career, interactions with team members and engagement with clients will be based upon your ability to behave as a professional.

While working in a veterinary hospital, expectations in professionalism may be included in your employee handbook. Often times, these expectations are listed as “Thou Shall Not” or “Code of Conduct.” As an example, the employee handbook may read:

Because your conduct is so very important to your success and that of the hospital, you are expected to maintain the highest standards of personal and professional conduct. Following is a list of things that could lead to disciplinary action:

* Lying on the employment application or any other time during employment.
* While on hospital property, being under the influence of alcoholic beverages or illegal drugs.
* Destruction or damage of hospital property.
* Disregarding safety regulations.

A positive spin on employee handbook expectations may read like this:

We value:

* Honesty
* Sobriety
* Strong work ethic
* Safety
* Be on time and ready to work
* Polite, genuine interaction with clients

Consider how you and your team can identify Professional Etiquette traits everyone values. Once defined, incorporate into your training program and employee handbook.

**First Impressions**

“You have less than 10 seconds and, realistically, closer to four seconds to make a good first impression on those you come into contact with. There is a world of research that clearly indicates that **you will be judged professionally and personally in the first few seconds of your meeting someone** for the first time. In fact, your first impression is recorded and is used as a yard stick for all future communication by those whom you meet,” states Kevin Hogan, PsyD, a leading expert in body language, persuasion and sales.

You are always making first impressions! Meeting a client for the first time, or team member or during networking events. Regardless if it is right or wrong, you will be judged upon your body language, appearance, attire and the level of confidence you exude.

Professional Etiquette includes greeting people by their name (or your name) and a firm handshake.

When speaking with someone, relax, engage, lean forward, loosen up “tight” clothing, be comfortable, open your arms and be inviting. When listening, nod, engage, lean forward and relax. Be aware of each person’s comfort zone. Pay attention to nonverbal clues indicating you are too close, not getting your point across or “pushing buttons.” Eyebrows, frowns, smiles or nose twitches are all nonverbal clues that will let you know if your conversation is being accepted or rejected.

**Engaging with team members**

When speaking with team members on the topic of professionalism, the word “respect” is always high on the priorities list! Yet, respect encompasses so much. Let’s break it down.

* Treat people with courtesy, politeness, and kindness.
* Encourage coworkers to express opinions and ideas.
* Listen to what others have to say before expressing your viewpoint. Never speak over, butt in, or cut off another person.
* Use people’s ideas to change or improve work. Let employees know you used their idea, or, better yet, encourage the person with the idea to implement the idea.
* Never insult people, name call, disparage or put down people or their ideas.
* Do not nit-pick, constantly criticize over little things, belittle, judge, demean or patronize. A series of seemingly trivial actions, added up over time, constitutes [bullying](https://www.thebalance.com/what-is-bullying-1918073).

--*How to Demonstrate Respect in the Workplace*

**Engaging with clients**

Your clients are the reason you are treating their pets. Veterinary medicine is a client based service, but we lose sight of that, periodically. Continually growing professional relationships with your clients and community continues to grow your career and satisfaction. Let’s break it down:

* Treat people with courtesy, politeness and kindness.
* Thank them for entrusting you with their pet.
* Listen to what they have to say about their pet and their lifestyle.
* Greet them with confidence, being well-groomed and prepared to help them.
* Never insult people, name call, disparage or put down people or their ideas.
* Do not judge them for the treatments they choose or choose not to do.

**Writing Correspondences**

Professional Etiquette does not stop at your appearance, mannerisms or ability to present yourself with confidence. It is also evident in the way you write and show up on social media. What you post in an email, on Facebook or other platforms are words that last a lifetime.

Before you hit the “send” or “post” button, simply ask:

* “Is this thoughtful or thoughtless?”
* “Is this considerate or inconsiderate?”

A good rule of thumb, “If you wouldn’t say it in a social or work setting, don’t say it online, in the most public of forums,” says Mashable in their *Ultimate Guide to Online Etiquette*.

**Confidentiality and Patient Information**

You may be aware of the laws governing your personal patient records and confidentiality as outlined in HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act). Even though the veterinary community is not bound to HIPAA, veterinary hospitals are still held to strict confidentiality in employee, client and patient information.

Within your employee handbook you may find a Confidentiality Form which veterinary team members are asked to read and sign. Management is then obliged to uphold the Confidentiality Policy. The statement may include, “All employees will be expected to exercise the greatest caution and concern in the protection of any information that is of a confidential nature.”

Now is a good time to check in with your management to talk about your hospital’s confidentiality policy.

**Take Professionalism Seriously**

You may now understand the importance of Professional Etiquette in your personal and professional life. Fully embrace your ability to BE a professional, in your appearance, attitude and written correspondences.



Yours in Professional Etiquette,

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**Resources**

1. Professionalism: The Decline of a Critical Set of Behaviors, Patrick Miller, Goals Institute, http://www.goalsinstitute.com/professionalism-the-decline-of-a-critical-set-of-behaviors/
2. Business Etiquette and Professionalism, Kristie Lorette, Chron, <http://smallbusiness.chron.com/business-etiquette-professionalism-3102.html>
3. Can you Hear your Body Talking? Kevin Hogan, PsyD, <http://www.kevinhogan.com/hearbody.htm>
4. How to Demonstrate Respect in the Workplace, Susan Heathfield, Human Resources, the balance, <https://www.thebalance.com/how-to-demonstrate-respect-in-the-workplace-1919376>
5. The Ultimate Guide to High-Tech and Social Media Manners, Mashable, <http://mashable.com/2017/02/14/guide-to-online-etiquette-manners-on-social-media/#GAZQjnt96EqV>