

## Managing your Professional Image

NCSF-CPT credential? Check. CPR/AED certification? Check. The necessary skills and abilities to train an individual effectively? Check. Seems like all the components that make up a successful Certified Personal Trainer are all in place, except for what is perhaps a fundamental, oftentimes overlooked component that separates a knowledgeable trainer from a professional trainer – professionalism. The term professionalism is an all encompassing term used to describe many aspects of an individual – how they dress, how they speak, the way they interact with co-workers and clients, and the manner in which they conduct their business. Regardless of an individual's aptitude, people who are deciding between two prospective merchants will more often than not select the one they feel exudes the right “feel” or presents the “image” they perceive to be optimal and even if less qualified or not as substantive. You probably wouldn't hire a Harvard educated lawyer if he came to court in sweatpants and a T-shirt, but you might hire a less qualified lawyer who is dressed in a well tailored suit, carries a leather briefcase and portrays a certain confidence that instills in you, the client, a feeling of comfort and impending effectiveness.

Personal Trainers need to think about all aspects of what drives their business, not just their credentials or underlying physique. Managing a professional image, which is comprised of the qualities and characteristics that are judged by co-workers, employers, and clients and perceived to identify competency and effectiveness, is an essential piece of a successful business. Notice the word “perceived” in the description of a professional image. Sometimes the professional image that a personal trainer may be attempting to portray is not (in fact) how others view that person. According to Laura Morgan Roberts, a researcher and author of “Changing Faces: Professional Image Construction in Diverse Organizational Settings” there is a distinct difference between what is known as “desired professional image” and “perceived professional

image” and namely it is the difference between what you want others to think about you and what they actually think about who you are.

Impression management is a practice used by many professionals across all disciplines whereby through a variety of verbal, non-verbal, and demonstrative tasks an individual can help shape their image in the minds of prospective clients. Examples of verbal impression management would include the grammar and diction used in conversation as well as the rate of speech, and characteristics of your voice such as pitch and tone. Trainers who are confident in their abilities to render their professional services should speak with confidence on subject matters for which they are educated. Clients are not likely inspired by a trainer who mumbles their words, does not speak clearly, or doesn't look them in the eyes when engaging them. Likewise, attrition is promoted by negativity particularly if the tone or language used during interactions is derogatory, demeaning, or condescending. Non-verbal impression management mostly involves appearance, body language and expressions. If you are employed by a gym/fitness facility that requires some type of uniform dress code (i.e. black shorts and a blue company shirt) then that is what you should wear. The clothes should be sized appropriately so they fit correctly and clean and never cut off or overly exposing regardless of one's physique. While this may sound like common sense to many, it is important to always reinforce these positive habits. Personal trainers are often criticized by allied health professionals because they present workout appearances rather than a professional one. This is not to suggest that the attire be formal or even collared but the image should reflect the job tasks functionally as well as professionally.

Other non-verbal impression management strategies can be used during each training session as well – having a client's file handy and being prepared with a detailed workout program

for the day's training are two examples. Typed and organized conveys a very different message than hand written tear outs. Finally, demonstrative actions such as actual job performance are extremely important in a job as hands-on as personal training. Acting and communicating in a professional manner when taking a body composition assessment, employing proper spotting technique, and following up with clients after or between training sessions to monitor progress is extremely important and will go a long way toward separating your services from some of your competitors. In many cases common sense is a useful marker. Clients should not be contacted at 10 o'clock at night without specific request nor should they be included in off color "friend" email blasts. Separating a business relationship from a friend relationship can be easily done with tact while still maintaining a sense of camaraderie in the relationship.

Expanding upon the above mentioned examples, below is a bulleted list of actions that all Certified Personal Trainers should implement relative to their specific service culture to manage their professional image and present the desired impression to employers, co-workers, and clients.

- ✓ Be punctual. 10-15 minutes early is on time. On time in a business meeting for instance is often considered late because it suggests the meeting or people in it are not worth any preparation. You don't ever want your clients to be waiting for you and you certainly don't want your employer waiting for you. Timeliness is an extremely important characteristic in a business that is based upon a professional commitment, this means appointments and scheduled training sessions.
- ✓ Speak clearly and confidently; articulate your thoughts completely and do not use slang. This goes for the interview process with a prospective employer and all interactions with your clients and co-workers. Let those you are speaking with

know that you are educated and competent in this field and that you intend to be an asset rather than a liability to the facility that hires you; instill in clients a confidence that you will help them reach their fitness goals. Fact: Communication and language skills are heavily evaluated in the perception of intelligence.

- ✓ Dress appropriately. If you are interviewing for a job, it is always better to over dress than to under dress. Even though personal training is an industry that doesn't require suits and ties, dressing in slacks and a dress shirt or professional business attire is appropriate for interviews. When training, adhere to company guidelines and always side with upscale appearance. If a uniform or name tag is required always present proudly and only wear clean clothes that fit appropriately.
- ✓ Be prepared. This means coming to an interview with an updated resume and a list of references as well as having proof of current certifications and credentials. When training, being prepared will mean premeditation. At a minimum that you have planned out the training session's activities beforehand. Have alternative exercises in mind if certain equipment is unavailable or the machine you need to use is occupied. It can also involve having proper documentation handy such as the Informed Consent and Health Status Questionnaire during the initial interview and training logs, a HR monitor and a stopwatch during training sessions.
- ✓ Be attentive and supportive. Attention to detail is always appreciated and considered one of the key elements of service. Understanding each of your clients' specific fitness goals, acknowledging them as relevant and working on achieving them in an appropriate manner should be the focus of all personal trainers. Simply selecting an exercise because you like it, or because it was demonstrated at a seminar may not

always be appropriate. Attention to the needs of the individual you are working with and choosing the most effective exercises for that client is an example of a demonstrative act that shows your competence and portrays the professional image you desire.

Utilizing the strategies and suggestions mentioned above to effectively manage your professional image are relevant aspects to success in the Personal Trainer business. Many

Certified Personal Trainers already adhere to many of the suggested guidelines, but it is often beneficial to periodically review your own practices and ensure that the image you desire is actually the image that others perceive. Have a peer evaluation done to ensure you are presenting the image you want. It is OK to speak with and seek feedback from employers, co-workers, and clients about how they perceive you as a professional. Subtle changes may be all that it takes to alter the way that others view you.

