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TREE CONSULTANCY

Professionalism in a commercial world

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In this second article of a four-part series on professionalism, Jeremy Barrell (www.barrelltreecare.co.uk) explores the demands of professional practice. Applying high ethical standards in a competitive commercial world creates challenging dilemmas that have to be resolved if you have any aspirations of professional recognition. Jeremy explores these complex issues, with a host of practical tips to help you get the balance right.

Heat in our streets

Tree consultancy is evolving at breakneck speed, driven by the momentum of climate change and the emerging realisation by government that trees do make a difference. Towards the end of the 1990s, the bulk of our work was advising homeowners what tree bits to chop off to give them more sun. During the following decade, our emphasis has dramatically shifted to a focus on increasing canopy cover, rather than trying to get rid of it! The pace of change has been staggering because, although urban trees are not a solution to the underlying carbon generation problem, they play an important role in buffering urban temperature rises, and that matters. Heat in our streets directly affects the public; it's not difficult to understand that it's going to get hot and trees will make life more comfortable. This is a simple message that even the dumbest politicians are struggling to

ignore. Trees are obviously creeping up political agendas, but does arboriculture have the professional infrastructure to deliver the management expertise that will inevitably be demanded?

Principles of professional behaviour

Arboriculture has a very strong craft origin: most of us have some sort of grounding in the practicalities of working outside with plants and an instinctive empathy with the natural environment. From that background, a move indoors to an office environment can seem daunting, but is it that hard and are the rules that different? Of course, it is more manicured, but the basics of successful business are the same wherever you work, and a professional attitude is an essential part of that recipe. As careers develop from craft through to advisory levels, how to behave as a professional becomes an increasingly important part of daily business life.

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In the US, the American Society of Consulting Arborists (www.asca-consultants.org) has developed a set of Standards of Professional Practice for its Registered Consultants, which provide some very useful insights into primary principles of professional behaviour. It advocates that professionalism can be distilled down to a list of duties that consultants should strive to comply with, which include:

- **Competence** – working to a measured standard
- **Due care** – a level of performance necessary to fulfil specified requirements measured against a standard of care
- **Impartiality** – acting as a disinterested and unbiased third party
- **Independence** – free from influence, control or domination
- **Integrity** – candid, fair, honest and of sound moral principle
- **Objectivity** – free from personal influences, emotions or prejudices
- **Public trust** – honouring the public trust in professionals and serving the public interest

Unsurprisingly, such principles are also a mainstay of traditional professional practice in the UK, but how do these translate to the modern business arena?



Meeting face-to-face is good business, a home-truth that is easily forgotten in the clamour for efficiency

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Professional practice in a commercial world

At the managerial and advisory level, everyone has a professional duty to know and comply with these ethical principles, but the reality is that they are not the only consideration in a competitive commercial world. It would be quite feasible to religiously observe them all and be out of business in a matter of months if the figures did not add up! The challenge for modern professionals in business is to make a profit, whilst not straying beyond this professional duty framework, despite all the temptations and distractions of the commercial environment – a tough task that is more about psychology than rigidly following a set of pre-determined rules. Understanding the social interactions between the people in a team, and between that team and its clients, is an essential part of business success; complying with professional duties in isolation is simply not enough!

Culture is the 'way we do things round here'; the shared beliefs and practices that identify a group of people and separate them from the crowd. We (at Barrell Tree Consultancy) think culture matters because it sets the boundaries for the way we behave as a team in business, which, in turn, has a significant impact on our reputation, i.e. how we are perceived by the clients we work for and our colleagues in the arboricultural community. Obviously, professional ethics are important and have to be a primary consideration, but how to run a

successful business at the same time is always going to be a challenge. Of course, no one size fits all and we certainly don't claim to have all the answers, but here are a few insights into what worked for us and could make a difference for you.

Communication

It is tempting in this modern world of instant communication to dismiss traditional principles of business as irrelevant and old-fashioned. Why waste time with a phone call when an email will do; why travel for hours for a meeting when a phone call is much more efficient? It all seems so obvious because intuitively, easier is better, and yet it completely disregards the human (psychological) dimension that has been the backbone of business since commerce began. Beneath the business façade, clients are just people like us with many of the same anxieties and psychological requirements; we like meeting face-to-face, seeing who we are dealing with, feeling confident our affairs are in safe hands, seeing reactions with our own eyes, etc, etc. These little things matter in a big way and yet there is intense pressure to disregard the basics in the clamour for progress.

We resist this wherever possible; within our business, we regularly meet to discuss the way things have been and where we want to go. It is tough to be remote, without colleagues on the same level to discuss difficult work issues with, but that is the plight of many isolated professionals. Indeed, I had no regular

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interaction with other colleagues when I first started and it was an obvious handicap. We now have six consultants, all in the same office, and we have mandatory weekly meetings. Our ability to discuss and analyse issues means we solve problems faster and more efficiently; we have our very own arboricultural 'think-tank'! Anyone can do this, but the starting point is to appreciate the hidden value of the process and then invest in the time it consumes.

Externally, we always try to talk to a client at the very least, and go out of our way to meet if at all possible. This all takes precious time, but the benefits in terms of improved communication and client confidence seem to more than justify the effort. Automated phone systems and bulk processing sound attractive if short-term profits are the priority. However, our experience is that the traditional approach of building personal relationships is an enduring strategy because, for whatever reason, it works.

Accuracy and records

We don't like mistakes, but imperfection is an integral part of human nature; we all have off-days and sometimes it simply goes wrong! We do not shirk analysing errors because it helps to minimise the chance of repeating the same mistake. Every report and plan that leaves our office is checked at least twice by different people, with an audit trail that can backtrack any mistake to its source. This is resource-hungry, but it motivates individuals to take ownership of their

own work and dramatically reduces our exposure to risk from errors.

Similarly, accurate and reliable records are a cornerstone of professional practice. We log every phone call, conversation and action for every job in its electronic folder, along with the time spent to the minute. This allows us to monitor performance and progress in real-time, which enables us to instantly update clients, understand the mechanics of our administration, refute unfounded allegations and keep a close track on finances. Furthermore, we have copies of every report we have ever written, right back to the first ones in 1980, which makes very interesting reading!

Service

Good business in the modern era is very much about speed; response, processing and delivery all have to be fast. We answer the phone quickly, we aim to get quotes back by return and anyone in the office can email document copies while the client is on the phone. We rarely use surface post; email is our preferred means of sending documents because it is instantaneous.

As our number of employees grew, we found that paper files were a problem because they could only be in one place at a time when they needed to be accessed by many people over the course of a project. Adoption of an electronic file management system allows access by anyone in the office at any time. This means any client can be updated on progress on their project by anyone in

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the office at the time of their phone call. Over the years, we discovered that one of the greatest anxieties for clients is not knowing when a report is going to be delivered. By adopting a method of due dates and regular client updating, we found that client phone calls chasing reports stopped completely. Every job now has a due date, each client knows when that is and there has to be a very good reason not to meet it. Not honouring promises is extremely damaging, but sometimes unavoidable. As soon as we know a project will be late, we tell the client and reschedule. They may be annoyed, but at least they know what is going on, which is much less harmful than the lateness being an unpleasant surprise.

Going that little bit further than expected is a great way of building client confidence. It demonstrates genuine commitment and care, which are so often missing from the 'have-a-nice-day' brigade. Within the bounds of the contractual agreement, nothing should be too much for us to do for our clients. Our role is to take control of their problems and deliver solutions, relieving them of all anxiety in the process. Our culture is to solve problems, not create them; once instructed, we take the strain – for a fee, of course!

Credentials

We have no trainee consultants; every consultant can cope with any problem that arises. We are delivering top-end advice for a top-end price and our clients

do not expect to be serviced by trainees. Only the very best people can deliver the standards we set. All our consultants are chartered and five of the six are AA Registered; to set this in a national context, no other UK consultancy comes even close to matching half of this line-up. It is this calibre of people that allows us to interact with all other professions as equals, especially in the legal and planning arenas.

Professionalism comes at a price, one that is set by the wider salary market. We match and exceed the salary and workplace packages offered by other allied professions, and have to continue to do so to retain the highest calibre of people. Our consultants get paid top salaries for organising, advising and project managing; it is a dreadful waste of that valuable resource to have them typing quotes or putting files away. We have one backup person for each consultancy; a very heavy overhead, but the productivity gains are significant.

Delivering a high quality service costs us and that is reflected in what we charge. Our fees have never been based on what other tree consultants charge; we compare ourselves to similar professions, such as surveyors and engineers, and match their rates. Our experience is that the best clients are very interested in value for money, rather than the cheapest price; we are rarely the cheapest.



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It would be easy to say these are our 'trade-secrets' but they are nothing new, just common-sense solutions applied to common problems that are obvious if you take the time to think it through. Our experience is that there is no single skill or attribute that is the key to success. Instead, understanding all the small things that matter and then working to improve each seems to be important.

This is great news for anyone with professional aspirations because it puts success well within reach. Caring about what you do and paying attention to detail are not rare gifts for the lucky; they are a mind-set that can be learnt and is accessible to all who take the time and trouble to look.

Future articles

Extreme consulting: is being an expert witness for you? Acting as an expert witness is the pinnacle of professional practice. Find out if you have what it takes to get to the top or whether you may be happier to avoid it altogether!

The standard of the duty of care relating to trees: When a tree failure results in harm, the courts will be focused on the duty of care and whether it was met by the duty holder. Jeremy will discuss how much management is enough in the context of recent court cases and emerging best practice for tree inspections.