



Professionalism in a commercial world

Article 2/6 for ISA Arborist News (April 2012)

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In his second article in a series on professionalism, Jeremy Barrell, a tree consultant based near London, explores the demands of professional practice in a commercial context. Applying high ethical standards in a competitive business world creates challenging dilemmas that must be resolved if you have aspirations for professional recognition. Barrell explores these complex issues, with a host of practical tips from his experience of trying to get the balance right.

The following article was adapted from an item first published in The ARB Magazine, the quarterly magazine for members of the Arboricultural Association (www.trees.org.uk).

Heat in Our Streets

In England, tree consultancy is evolving at breakneck speed, driven by the momentum of climate change and the emerging realization by government that trees do make a difference. Toward the end of the 1990s, the bulk of consultancy work focused on advising homeowners what tree bits to chop off to give them more sun (We don't get much sun in England!). In the following decade, the emphasis dramatically shifted to 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 it's going to get hot and trees will make life more comfortable. The importance of trees is now widely acknowledged, but does English arboriculture have the professional infrastructure to deliver the management expertise that will inevitably be demanded?

Principles of Professional Behavior

Arboriculture has a very strong craft origin. Most of us have some experience 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 so difficult, with such different rules? Of course, the new setting 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, behaving as a professional becomes an increasingly important part of daily business life.

In the United States, 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 the primary principles of professional behavior. The standards advocate that professionalism can be distilled to a list of guiding values with which consultants should strive to comply, including:

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- Competence — working to a measured standard
- Due care — a level of performance necessary to fulfill 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 — honoring the public's trust in professionals and serving the public interest

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

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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 diligently 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. Culture matters because it sets the boundaries for business behaviour, which, in turn, has a significant impact on reputation. 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 there are certainly no simple answers, but here are a few insights that may 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 ordinary people, just like each of 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, and seeing reactions with our own eyes. These little things matter in a big way, and yet there is intense pressure to

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disregard the basics in the clamour for progress.



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

It is very easy to favour the illusion that the rather 'fluffy' human aspects of business are somehow less important than the more measureable textbook objectives, such as efficiency and profit. Indeed, an increasingly common business model is to save on office overheads by employees working from home, relying on the internet for internal communication. Of course, it's efficient on paper, but does it build an enduring team to match the performance that regular face-to-face contact can deliver? Feeling isolated, without the ability to interact with colleagues on the same level, is a common complaint for many professionals just starting out; it is obviously important. In addition to the psychological benefits of being able to meet and talk, productivity can improve as well. Opportunities to discuss and analyse issues can help solve problems faster and more efficiently. Face-to-face communication is important, but the starting point is to appreciate the hidden value of the process and then invest in the time it consumes.

The same principle applies to communicating with clients; talking is

better than emailing, but meeting is the best. This all takes precious time, but the benefits in terms of client confidence often more than justify the effort. Automated phone systems and bulk processing sound attractive if short-term profits are the priority, but however old fashioned it may seem, building personal relationships is an enduring strategy because, for whatever reason, it works.

Background Administration

Nobody like mistakes, but imperfection is an integral part of human nature; we all have off-days and sometimes it simply goes wrong! Reducing errors to a minimum is one of the most challenging aspects of modern consultancy, but failing to grasp this thorny issue can have serious professional consequences. Progressive businesses will always analyse errors because it minimises the chance of repeating the same mistake. Similarly, proofing all draft documents before publication by a person other than the author is an essential safeguard. In the same vein, accurate and reliable records are a cornerstone of professional practice. Logging every phone call, conversation and action for each project, along with the time spent to the minute, may seem tedious, but it is an essential prerequisite of long-term success. Administration is resource-hungry, but it is a mainstay of professional practice, and businesses ignore it at their peril.

Service

Good business in the modern era is very much about speed; response, processing and delivery all have to be fast. Answering the phone within a few rings, getting quotes back by return and being able to email document copies while the client is on the phone should be normal, not the exception.

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Many of us will be familiar with paper files and feel comfortable with them, but their big disadvantage is that they can only be in one place at a time. In contrast, an electronic file management system allows access by anyone in the office at any time. This means any client can be updated about progress on their project by anyone in the office at the time of their phone call.

A common anxiety for clients is the worry that a report may be late. This can be overcome by adopting a method of due-dates and regular client updating, where the client is told the precise date when the report will be delivered and kept informed on progress. Again, it requires administration, but the big benefit is that client anxiety is significantly reduced. As we all know, not honouring promises is extremely damaging, but sometimes unavoidable. Where a project is expected to run over on time, it is much better to tell the client and reschedule, rather than say nothing with the inevitable stress that will cause.

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 superficial product-to-profit management model. Within the bounds of the contractual agreement, nothing should be too much for you to do for your clients. Your role is to take control of their problems and deliver solutions, relieving them of all anxiety in the process. If you adopt a culture of solving problems, not creating them, then you should take the strain – and be paid accordingly, of course!

Salaries and fees

On an individual level, professionalism comes at a price, one that is set by the

wider salary market. If arboricultural consultancies are to retain the calibre of people necessary to interact with the legal and planning professions, then they must match and exceed the salary and workplace packages offered by those professions. Similarly, on a business level, delivering a high quality service has high overheads and that has to be reflected in what is charged for each project. For both salaries and fees, it can be tempting to look at rates within arboriculture and build a strategy around those observations. An alternative approach is to review longer-established professions, such as surveyors and engineers, which may be a more reliable benchmark because they have more experience at properly accounting for hidden overheads that take time to understand and appreciate. Whichever approach is favoured, at the consultancy level, clients are very interested in value for money, rather than the cheapest price, and survival in the long-term is all about getting that balance right.

There are no 'trade-secrets' here, 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 the benefits are accessible to all who take the time and trouble to look.



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Future articles

Extreme consulting; is being an expert witness for you? Wherever you are in the World, acting as an expert witness is the pinnacle of professional practice. From the preparation to appearing in court, 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. The Author will discuss the English perspective on how much management is enough in the context of recent court cases and emerging good practice for tree inspections.



Jeremy Barrell has worked with trees all his life, building up a modest contracting business in the early 1980s and 1990s before concentrating on full-time consultancy in 1995. From those humble beginnings, Barrell Tree Consultancy (www.barrelltreecare.co.uk) now has six consultants advising on planning and legal issues throughout the UK.