

Creating a Positive Professional Image

By Mallory Stark

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As HBS professor Laura Morgan Roberts sees it, if you aren't managing your own professional image, others are.

"People are constantly observing your behavior and forming theories about your competence, character, and commitment, which are rapidly disseminated throughout your workplace," she says. "It is only wise to add your voice in framing others' theories about who you are and what you can accomplish."

There are plenty of books telling you how to "dress for success" and control your body language. But keeping on top of your personal traits is only part of the story of managing your professional image, says Roberts. You also belong to a social identity group—African American male, working mother—that brings its own stereotyping from the people you work with, especially in today's diverse workplaces. You can put on a suit and cut your hair to improve your appearance, but how do you manage something like skin color?

Roberts will present her research, called "Changing Faces: Professional Image Construction in Diverse Organizational Settings," in the October issue of the *Academy of Management Review*.

She discusses her research in this interview.

Mallory Stark: What is a professional image?

Laura Morgan Roberts: Your professional image is the set of qualities and characteristics that represent perceptions of your competence and character as judged by your key constituents (i.e., clients, superiors, subordinates, colleagues).

Q: What is the difference between "desired professional image" and "perceived professional image?"

A: It is important to distinguish between the image you want others to have of you and the image that you think people currently have of you.

Most people want to be described as technically competent, socially skilled, of strong character and integrity, and committed to your work, your team, and your company. Research shows that the most favorably regarded traits are trustworthiness, caring, humility, and capability.

Ask yourself the question: What do I want my key constituents to say about me when I'm not in the room? This description is your **desired professional image**. Likewise, you might ask yourself the question: What am I concerned that my key constituents might say about me when I'm not in the room? The answer to this question represents your **undesired professional image**.

You can never know exactly what all of your key constituents think about you, or how they would describe you when you aren't in the room. You can, however, draw inferences about your current professional image based on your interactions with key constituents. People often give you direct feedback about your persona that tells you what they think about your level of competence, character, and commitment. Other times, you may receive indirect signals about your image, through job assignments or referrals and recommendations. Taken together, these direct and indirect signals shape your **perceived professional image**, your best guess of how you *think* your key constituents perceive you.

Q: How do stereotypes affect perceived professional image?

A: In the increasingly diverse, twenty-first century workplace, people face a number of complex challenges to creating a positive professional image. They often experience a significant incongruence between their desired professional image and their perceived professional image. In short, they are not perceived in the manner they desire; instead, their undesired professional image may be more closely aligned with how their key constituents actually perceive them.

What lies at the source of this incongruence? Three types of identity threats—predicaments, devaluation, and illegitimacy—compromise key constituents' perceptions of technical competence, social competence, character, and commitment. All professionals will experience a "predicament" or event that reflects poorly on their competence, character, or commitment at some point in time, due to mistakes they have made in the past that have become public knowledge, or competency gaps (e.g., shortcomings or limitations in skill set or style).

Members of negatively stereotyped identity groups may experience an additional form of identity threat known as "devaluation." Identity devaluation occurs when negative attributions about your social identity group(s) undermine key constituents' perceptions of your competence, character, or commitment. For example, African American men are stereotyped as being less intelligent and more likely to engage in criminal behavior than Caucasian men. Asian Americans are stereotyped as technically competent, but lacking in the social skills required to lead effectively. Working mothers are stereotyped as being less committed to their profession and less loyal to their employing organizations. All of these stereotypes pose obstacles for creating a positive professional image.

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Even positive stereotypes can pose a challenge for creating a positive professional image if someone is perceived as being unable to live up to favorable expectations of their social identity group(s). For example, clients may question the qualifications of a freshly minted MBA who is representing a prominent strategic consulting firm. Similarly, female medical students and residents are often mistaken for nurses or orderlies and challenged by patients who do not believe they are legitimate physicians.

Q: What is impression management and what are its potential benefits?

A: Despite the added complexity of managing stereotypes while also demonstrating competence, character, and commitment, there is promising news for creating your professional image! Impression management strategies enable you to explain predicaments, counter devaluation, and demonstrate legitimacy. People manage impressions through their non-verbal behavior (appearance, demeanor), verbal cues (vocal pitch, tone, and rate of speech, grammar and diction, disclosures), and demonstrative acts (citizenship, job performance).

My research suggests that, in addition to using these traditional impression management strategies, people also use social identity-based impression management (SIM) to create a positive professional image. SIM refers to the process of strategically presenting yourself in a manner that communicates the meaning and significance you associate with your social identities. There are two overarching SIM strategies: positive distinctiveness and social recategorization.

Positive distinctiveness means using verbal and non-verbal cues to claim aspects of your identity that are personally and/or socially valued, in an attempt to create a new, more positive meaning for that identity. Positive distinctiveness usually involves attempts to educate others about the positive qualities of your identity group, advocate on behalf of members of your identity group, and incorporate your background and identity-related experiences into your workplace interactions and innovation.

Social recategorization means using verbal and non-verbal cues to suppress other aspects of your identity that are personally and/or socially devalued, in an attempt to distance yourself from negative stereotypes associated with that group. Social recategorization involves minimization and avoidance strategies, such as physically and mentally conforming to the dominant workplace culture while being careful not to draw attention to identity group differences and one's unique cultural background.

Rather than adopting one strategy wholesale, most people use a variety of strategies for managing impressions of their social identities. In some situations, they choose to draw attention to a social identity, if they think it will benefit them personally or professionally. Even members of devalued social identity groups, such as African American professionals, will draw attention to their race if it creates mutual understanding with colleagues, generates high-quality connections with clients, or enhances their experience of authenticity and fulfillment in their work. In other situations, these same individuals may choose to minimize their race in order to draw attention to an alternate identity, such as gender, profession, or religion, if they feel their race inhibits their ability to connect with colleagues or clients.

Successful impression management can generate a number of important personal and organizational benefits, including career advancement, client satisfaction, better work relationships (trust, intimacy, avoiding offense), group cohesiveness, a more pleasant organizational climate, and a more fulfilling work experience. However, when unsuccessfully employed, impression management attempts can lead to feelings of deception, delusion, preoccupation, distraction, futility, and manipulation.

Q: How do authenticity and credibility influence the positive outcomes of impression management attempts?

A: In order to create a positive professional image, impression management must effectively accomplish two tasks: build credibility and maintain authenticity. When you present yourself in a manner that is both true to self and valued and believed by others, impression management can yield a host of favorable outcomes for you, your team, and your organization. On the other hand, when you present yourself in an inauthentic and non-credible manner, you are likely to undermine your health, relationships, and performance.

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Most often, people attempt to build credibility and maintain authenticity simultaneously, but they must negotiate the tension that can arise between the two. Your "true self," or authentic self-portrayal, will not always be consistent with your key constituents' expectations for professional competence and character. Building credibility can involve being who others want you to be, gaining social approval and professional benefits, and leveraging your strengths. If you suppress or contradict your personal values or identity characteristics for the sake of meeting societal expectations for professionalism, you might receive certain professional benefits, but you might compromise other psychological, relational, and organizational outcomes.

Q: What are the steps individuals should take to manage their professional image?

A: First, you must realize that if you aren't managing your own professional image, someone else is. People are constantly observing your behavior and forming theories about your competence, character, and commitment, which are rapidly disseminated throughout your workplace. It is only wise to add your voice in framing others' theories about who you are and what you can accomplish.

Be the author of your own identity. Take a strategic, proactive approach to managing your image:

Identify your ideal state.

- What are the core competencies and character traits you want people to associate with you?
- Which of your social identities do you want to emphasize and incorporate into your workplace interactions, and which would you rather minimize?

Assess your current image, culture, and audience.

- What are the expectations for professionalism?
- How do others currently perceive you?

Conduct a cost-benefit analysis for image change.

- Do you care about others' perceptions of you?
- Are you capable of changing your image?
- Are the benefits worth the costs? (Cognitive, psychological, emotional, physical effort)

Use strategic self-presentation to manage impressions and change your image.

- Employ appropriate traditional and social identity-based impression management strategies.
- Pay attention to the balancing act—build credibility while maintaining authenticity.

Manage the effort you invest in the process.

- Monitoring others' perceptions of you
- Monitoring your own behavior
- Strategic self-disclosure
- Preoccupation with proving worth and legitimacy

About the author

Mallory Stark is a career information librarian at Baker Library.

Additional Information:

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