

# Public Relations 101

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Public relations and good communication skills are a frequently overlooked, but necessary part of an operator's job. The most important reason to practice good public relations is to maintain the confidence and overall satisfaction of the customers we serve. The more content the consumer, the easier and less stress filled your job will remain.

As operators, we are often the only person from our system that the customer will ever see or communicate with directly, so it is crucial that we make that experience as pleasant as possible for the customer. An operator should always maintain a friendly and courteous demeanor while communicating with the public. While you may need to make this encounter brief due to time constraints, it is important to listen to the customer and direct any questions to the appropriate personnel.

Proper dress is very important. Work wear is obviously needed in the field, but should still appear presentable. If you are attending a board meeting, perhaps more formal dress will be required. Always try to dress to the level of the audience with which you will be interacting.

Listening skills are perhaps the most important part of being a good communicator. With that said, I must confess, my wife frequently accuses me of having a hearing disorder she refers to as "selective listening". I have heard that most people absorb only 10% of what they read or hear, so listening and making the appropriate notes could make you a better overall employee. Some good techniques for being a good listener include: Maintain eye contact with the person speaking, encourage continued speaking, and summarize what you have heard.

By maintaining eye contact, the person speaking can tell you are interested and will react accordingly when you respond. You can encourage continued speaking by asking questions such as "what else happened?", or "could you tell me more about this?". When the speaker is nearing the end of a comment or idea it is often helpful to summarize what they have said so as to avoid confusion about their opinions. This also shows the speaker that you were listening and would like to comment on their opinion. Perhaps the most important way to be a good listener is to allow the person speaking to finish their comment without interruption.

When speaking, try to think of what you are going to say before commenting. Always try to pronounce words correctly and clearly, get to the point, and be respectful of others opinions. Try to have facts or documentation available during a conversation, especially during a board meeting, to avoid hearsay or innuendo. Last, if you are not knowledgeable on a specific topic, it may be advisable to take more of a listening role and direct comments more as questions, to gain more information on the topic.

There are many ways that good public relations skills may benefit you as an employee. A few more to consider may include the operation of a system vehicle. Driving recklessly can draw a lot of negative attention to you and your system, and should be avoided. Likewise, driving around town all day or stopping at the local diner for breakfast every morning may also lead to some resentment. Just remember, your every move with the vehicle can impact the way the system is perceived by the customers.

Another significant area of interest is dealing with the news media. Now, most of us will never have to do this! As we all know, when the cameras show up, so do the supervisors and the elected officials. And that is just fine by most of us. However, if you find yourself in this situation, the same rules apply. Always be polite and courteous, briefly (and I stress briefly) address the facts, recommend a higher authority to speak with, and by all means, DO NOT allow them to photograph anything on a job site that may be deemed unsafe or cause concern or panic among your customers.

This article briefly touches on the public relations topic. My main objective is to get each of you to think a little more about how important this is to your career. An operator who has above average community support and confidence is usually compensated at a higher level, and gets a little more say in the system management than an operator who is thought of negatively within the community. I also realize this is not every operators "cup of tea", but it is a necessary evil of the job. Perhaps a little more work in this field will lead to continued career success and satisfaction! 💧