

24 Professionalism, Quality and the Market Place

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Abstract

The author argues that professionalism and quality cannot be separated from market expectations. He illustrates the complexity of the market place and emphasises the need to balance the interests of the various stakeholders. He discusses the tensions that exist between being demand led, value led and funding led. He expresses concern over pressures to compromise expectations and challenges providers to reappraise continually the degree to which they are giving their clients maximum value. He identifies the key elements of professionalism and suggests how it might be recognised.

Professionalism, quality and the market place

It is not the employer who pays the wages. It is the customer.

(Henry Ford)

We have all had powerful, high impact, sometimes life changing experiences in the outdoors. That is why we are outdoor enthusiasts. When it comes to passing on that enthusiasm to others, we would naturally wish to do so in a professional way. But what does this mean? Is professionalism giving our charges the intensity of experience that we know is so powerful? Or is it giving them what they want? Or what their teacher expects? Or what someone will pay for? I suggest that it is impossible to ask what is professionalism without also asking who our customers are, what do they want, what do they understand by quality and what influences are there on the decision to buy? In other words, professionalism and quality cannot be separated from market expectations.

Before developing this argument, let us be clear that we do not have to be in a commercial environment to talk about purchasing decisions. Time is our most precious commodity and a young person's decision to invest time in an outdoor activity offered free of charge by a voluntary youth organisation is entirely analogous to the decision to buy a commercially packaged experience. Many volunteers are wholly professional in their unpaid work and the debate about quality and professionalism applies equally in a voluntary context.

Consumers in the market place

A simple model of the market place consists of suppliers and consumers. If only reality were as simple as that. Anyone who has organised a custom designed course for members of an organisation will recognise the tension intrinsic in the situation. The question 'Who is the customer?' is far from easy to answer. To what extent is it the organisation that pays for the course? To what extent is it the person who organised the course and may have defined the objectives? To what extent is it the unwitting participant who may turn up with quite different needs and perceptions? In reality, all three are stakeholders in the success of the course and the facilitator must tread a fine line between often conflicting interests in an attempt to satisfy all.

There are similarly varied stakeholders in educational provision. In simplistic terms, it might be that the young people want to have fun, their teacher wants to achieve educational outcomes, the parents want their children back in one piece, the head teacher wants to be confident that the school trip will not end up in the newspapers and the governors want it to enhance their position in the league tables. To complicate matters further, many young people's courses are funded by a government agency that will bring its own targets and monitoring criteria. We must add to the complexity of the market by asking what society wants.

Society appears desperately confused. Fed by a media which sells more copies on the emotional impact of a rare outdoor tragedy than on the

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infinitely greater waste of road accident deaths and suicides, it appears that society has a completely unrealistic appreciation of the true level of risk. At a rational level, society appears willing to accept huge statistical risks. For example, the Health and Safety Executive (2001: 46) suggests that an individual risk of death of one in a thousand per annum should be just 'tolerable' for any substantial category of workers. However, in the same document, the Health and Safety Executive recognises that societal concerns increase in the case of vulnerable groups such as children and that a tighter framework than might be rationally required is felt necessary for these groups. Whether or not this constitutes societal hysteria, I believe that, individually, parents have an intuitive understanding that adventure is good for their children. There is hope that this will continue to outweigh their concerns. Libby Purves (2002) wrote:

I have spent the last 15 years nervously entrusting my children's lives to other adults as they confronted dinghies, canoes, horses, tall ships, campfires and the rest. I know the dread. But it has always seemed worthwhile, and reassurance has always lain in a belief in the high quality and knowledge of the people who lead them to conquer their fear and come through triumphant and capable. This ideal of high quality – whether in outdoor-adventure professionals or in ordinary teachers taking a class trip – is a gold standard to be cherished.

It was in order to encourage parents and society in general to balance risk and benefits that the English Outdoor Council launched the *Campaign for Adventure* (2001). However, underpinning any campaign for increased participation in the outdoors must be the sort of consistent professionalism that will reassure Purves and other parents.

Suppliers in the market place

There is of course one more set of stakeholders – those who provide the experience. It could be argued that their needs are irrelevant in the context that they are there to meet others' needs. However, I think it is important to consider the provider's needs and to ask whether they matter. My answer would be emphatically yes. This is because almost everything that is achieved in the

outdoors is achieved through the skilful guidance of an enthusiastic, committed instructor or leader. To keep the freshness and spark that helps to communicate the real value of the outdoors, it is vital that the person who actually delivers the experience finds their job motivating and satisfying.

Each individual will of course have a different set of motivators. For some, one beginners' climbing group after another can begin to pall and they may need a variety of different activities or more advanced courses. Some others, who often achieve outstanding results, are able to maintain the freshness by such a degree of unconscious competence in activity terms that nearly all their attention can be on the individual participants and their learning and development. For me, in 35 years full time work in outdoor education, I have never been bored. Frustrated, tired and apprehensive yes, but never bored. Indeed, any of these negative emotions are rare in comparison with those positive factors that motivate many outdoor staff – the satisfaction of helping others to achieve and the privilege of working in such a special environment. As an employer, I consider it is really important to create conditions in which all staff can experience that same satisfaction.

We can neither deliver quality nor professionalism unless we are able to survive in the market place. To do so requires us to acknowledge that life in a few years' time will be very different to what it is today – to accept that change is endemic. As adventurers, we ought to be comfortable with the idea of working in a context where the outcome is uncertain. We should recognise that we cannot control the environment in which we operate but at the same time should realise that our decisions can nevertheless affect the probability of the survival of our organisation. A parallel can be drawn with white water canoeing or powder skiing – in neither of these environments do we have absolute control over our overall motion, yet by exerting small control forces, we can both survive and use our relative motion to get where we want to be. One such control force is to be continually responsive to our customers' needs, achieving consistent customer satisfaction.

The outdoor community is complex; statutory, voluntary, charitable and private sectors are all represented. Such a mixed economy has both

strengths and weaknesses. A strength is that the sum total of provision is less affected by external influences that can impact negatively on one sector. A weakness is that it is less easy for the outside world to see the outdoor community as a coherent whole. Can we define a concept of professionalism that applies equally across these disparate sectors? I believe so – because the relationship between customers and providers is the same in each. No organisation, in any sector, will survive unless it consistently provides a service which will attract and retain users. It is clear that there is an extraordinarily broad range of stakeholders in what would appear to be a simple purchasing transaction. Quality and professionalism must be seen in the context of those many stakeholders. It must also be seen in the context of what we are trying to achieve.

What are we trying to achieve?

This should be relatively easy to answer. More difficult questions are what *should* we be trying to achieve and to what extent should we impose our beliefs and values? Not only is there a tension between trying to satisfy the needs of our various publics, but there is a tension between giving this 'composite' public what 'it' thinks it wants and giving it what we think it should get. Clearly, a provider offering highly subsidised courses can impose to a greater extent than one wholly dependent on market forces. Even so, too strong a 'product orientation' does not sit comfortably with the 'customer orientation' that is prevalent in today's market place.

A provider has a far clearer idea than the average consumer of the enormous potential of outdoor education and might be expected to influence the purchaser to buy a thoroughly worthwhile experience rather than a shallow one. However, there are real pressures to compromise the depth or breadth of what we offer, for a variety of reasons. I suggest that there has in general been some lowering of expectations in order to create a more controlled environment. Activities have been made safe but sanitised. It is easy to convince ourselves that a pool canoeing session allows pupils to progress faster than a session on open water. It is easy to argue that an indoor climbing wall is a more controlled learning environment than a crag. It is easy to let genuine

environmental concern restrict our activities to the grounds of a centre in order to minimise vehicle use. Does this represent best value for our clients? I suggest that, in general, our clients have a less adventurous experience than they had some years ago and contend that our taking the easy way of demonstrating compliance with current expectations is a significant factor in this.

Another 'easy' option is the way we choose to demonstrate competence in our staff. Although those on the steering group fought successfully at the time of drafting the Adventure Activities Licensing Regulations to allow providers to define competence other than by qualification, few do. It is easier to demonstrate compliance by requiring a qualification. It could be argued that we are now more consistently professional than we were a few years ago. We are undoubtedly better at the sort of processes that demonstrate to teachers, head teachers, governors and society that we are professional but do we give those in our care a better quality experience as a result? I doubt it.

Society clearly demands more than it did in terms of demonstrating that our approach represents good practice. Perhaps this contributes towards our tendency to seek an increasingly controlled environment and to be less adventurous ourselves in what we attempt with our pupils. It is a matter for personal regret that I see young people today being far more adventurous (or perhaps risk seeking) on their skateboards or in unstructured play than we allow them to be on an 'adventure' course. Should our expectations be higher? I suggest that we could be far more adventurous than we often are within a perfectly acceptable framework of safety. It does however require an effort both to set up more adventurous activities and to persuade others that the effort is worthwhile.

This is where we will inevitably (and rightly) bring our values to bear on the needs of our clients. 'Need' is arguably a mix of what our clients know they 'want' and what we know will benefit them. We know that to encourage young people to make a special effort to do something they are apprehensive about will have enormous benefits when they succeed. At the same time, we must be sensitive as to how far we go in that process of encouragement. I suggest that we have a responsibility to reassess such value judgements constantly. For example, a recent report (OFSTED,

2002) showed that the educational attainment gap between boys and girls is now clearly apparent at a far younger age than it was. Does this say something about an increasingly unsatisfied need that young males have for firm guidance and challenge to channel their intrinsic propensity to push at the limits? If so, does this have implications for our work?

Reducing expectations have been apparent in the 'Summer Activities for 16 Year Olds' programme, relaunched as 'Uproject'. During the first two pilot years of the programme, there was a great deal of innovative activity across the country, with extended community involvement by many residential providers. By 2002, changes to the way the programme was funded diluted the influence of the outdoor community and the adventure element was, in many cases, watered down into a standardised five day residential – packaged convenience rather than innovation. That programme illustrates well another tension that is evident in our response to the market. The market for the Uproject is effectively dictated by the government's funding criteria. When the scheme was first proposed, representatives of the outdoor community tried (unsuccessfully) to argue that the scheme should extend to a younger age group, on the basis that an intervention at age 14 would have more potential impact on a young person's behaviour. However, there has been no lack of providers willing to compromise maximum impact to comply with the criteria.

Why is this and to what extent should we respond to government agendas? There are many to which the outdoors can make a valuable contribution – for example, raising standards, active citizenship and social inclusion. Moreover, proposals by the Department for Education and Skills (Department for Education and Skills, 2002) for the 14–19 phase of education present us with enormously exciting new opportunities. Many individuals in the outdoor community welcome the fact that the potential of the outdoors to contribute to social policy has been increasingly recognised over recent years and feel an obligation to become involved in such initiatives in order to do their best to make them work. The success of the outdoor community in achieving this recognition can, however, bring its own problems. As more funded programmes come on stream, either the amount of provision must increase or providers must make

choices as to how their resources should be prioritised.

Should we then simply accept market demand and cater for what the public or the funder wants or should we strive to influence the market to buy what we think we *ought* to provide? I should like to challenge providers to reappraise continually the balance between taking the easy option (by catering for that which is easiest to sell) and proactively creating demand for approaches that they feel will have maximum educational potential.

What is professionalism?

It has taken some time to lay out the argument, but the above considerations suggest that professionalism and quality are inseparable and that they are in turn contingent on the market place. The three are inter-dependent. The following three points attempt to define professionalism and its relationship with quality and the market place:

- Professionalism is the set of personal abilities, attributes and values that allow us to deliver quality experiences consistently.
- A quality experience for a given group of participants is clearly related to their individual needs.
- There must be a compromise between those individual needs and the expectations of the range of stakeholders that exist in our complex market place.

It may be surprising to see the demands of the market place positioned so prominently in a discussion of professionalism. However, there should be no conflict between our interests and those of our clients. Commercial transactions, as with other human transactions, are optimised by creating a 'win – win' situation. We will both maximise the probability of our own survival and delight our customers more consistently if we deliver quality services in a professional way. Kotler (1976: 15), an authority on marketing, defines the marketing concept as:

... a customer orientation ... aimed at generating customer satisfaction as the key to satisfying organisational goals.

Not only is the mutual benefit evident in this definition but customer satisfaction is rightly emphasised. Customer satisfaction is the

outcome of a quality experience related to participants' needs. That should be the aim of professionalism.

Recognising professionalism

What then are the implications for the recognition of professionalism? We need to ask: how are quality and professionalism currently measured, would it be helpful to create a more commonly accepted form of recognition, who should do this and, what are the elements that make up professional competence? Quality is relatively easily recognised and measured. Client feedback gives a clear message. There are excellent networks where best practice is shared. Providers are subject to a variety of assessments, including National Governing Body approval schemes, licensing inspections and assessment against standards such as Investor in People.

Professionalism is less easy to measure. A technical qualification guarantees a basic skill level but this forms only a tiny part of the totality of professionalism. A breadth of awareness gained from higher education will complement this. However, many people who have made an enormous contribution to work in the outdoors have done so through a vocational rather than an academic route and that alternative must be retained. Finally, skill and knowledge, however gained, are not enough. The essence of professionalism is how the individual applies these at the customer interface.

It would in my view be enormously helpful (to employers, employees and the public) to create a simple but comprehensive system that would give recognition to anyone who works in the outdoors. It is considered that the Institute for Outdoor Learning is an entirely appropriate organisation to administer this. At the time of writing, the Institute was in the process of developing a system for supporting and recognising professionalism by creating a Continuous Professional Development and Accreditation Scheme.

In drafting the requirements, the working group considered the range of attributes that outdoor employers are looking for in their employees. This clearly varies from sector to sector; the Outdoor Workforce Development Plan (SPRITO, 2002) lists these. Competence in some areas (such as technical and facilitation skills) is relatively easy to

measure. Attributes (such as enthusiasm) are less easy to measure but no less essential. Values such as the personal integrity to deliver consistent quality are arguably even more important. The new scheme must attempt to measure the whole range of abilities, attributes and values that constitute professionalism. Time will tell whether the accreditation of professionalism achieves the benefits for the profession that is hoped for. I for one look forward to the time when it is clearly understood what it means to be professional, when professionals are trusted to give those in their charge a quality experience, when they themselves consequently have the confidence to re-expand their ambitions, when they consistently give their clients real adventures (in relation to their needs) and when society has renewed confidence in the outdoor community. I also look forward to the recognition of outdoor professionals by the outside world and the added ability to influence decisions that this will create.

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