
Do We Have the Public's Trust?

(Second in a series)

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ARTICLE

Do we have the public's trust? The straight answer is: "Yes, of course we do." But is this the answer of complacency or confidence? In reality, the profession and the public interact with the public on multiple levels. When we work down to the one-on-one interaction level, then the question is more difficult to answer. So much depends upon the individual professional, the member of the public and the circumstance. Whatever the public experience, the profession is viewed as a whole. In this sense, individual professionals can have a huge impact on how trustworthy the public deems the profession.

'The public' isn't one homogenous group of people with identical thoughts, ideas, values, and wishes. The world would be a very boring place if this were true! In addition, the public's interests are ever evolving – priorities, objectives and values change based on time and geography. What was important in 1980 in Prince George is not the same as what's important today in Nanaimo.

According to a recent white paper by the Professional Associations Research Network, or PARN, (The professional body sector contribution to social infrastructure by Andy Friedman, 2015), while people may not be able to determine and/or define what standards enhance public trust, they do have a good enough understanding of the standards to be disappointed when those standards are not delivered as expected.

Because of the diversity of thought and the evolving nature of trust, we are constantly measuring whether or not we have the public trust through tools that gauge the profession as a collective (i.e. surveys, feedback). Public trust through individual professional actions is also monitored through our complaints and discipline process as well as issues picked up by the media.

Here's a quick checklist of attributes that will help you judge whether or not you have the public's trust. If most of these attributes are present in your practice, you are probably doing a great job of earning the public's trust. If you only have one or two attributes, start working on this area and consider why it is the case.

- Consult proactively – Don't wait for a concerned citizen to call you – do your best to reach out to stakeholders and First Nations early in the planning process. Listen actively and consider all input and be responsive to concerns. Consider whether consensus is possible – it isn't always but you can still maintain a relationship by ensuring that you listen to all concerns.
- Communicate clearly – Even the most knowledgeable member of the public does not know as much about forestry as you do. But they do know their concerns. So, be sure to explain your plans and procedures in clear language and drop the forestry jargon.

- Establish and nurture good relationships – Relationship building can take many months or years but the effort required is always worth it. Once you get to know a group (such as a local bike or ski club), they will learn that you're a trustworthy individual and will come to you with questions. If you have to go to them with unpleasant news (your employer's logging plans will destroy their trails), they will be more likely to want to work with you rather than against you. Be sure to maintain contact to develop credibility and trust. Also maintain a strong network of professionals outside forestry (e.g. archaeologists, biologists, engineers, etc.). These experts can help answer your questions and ensure your projects are completed adequately.
- Know your community – Be aware of current events and social, political, cultural and economic directions. If you live in the community, chances are, you're already knowledgeable about it. If not, learn about what the community values in the forest. Is there a tourism operator that employs half the town? Maybe maintaining viewscales is more important than mill jobs. Read your local papers, engage with your local chamber of commerce and other business gatherings.
- Prioritize values in your region -- ask the engaging questions to seek out the values (e.g. karst management, harvesting mountain pine beetle wood in a short timeframe to ensure timber value, etc.). Engage local First Nations and stakeholders, talk to colleagues (which may include natural resource professionals outside the forestry profession). Document accurately and frequently --The majority of your work will be at the forefront of project planning (asking the right questions, risk managing hazards and engaging the right natural resource professionals). Project plans should be monitoring and adjusted for unanticipated issues and to incorporate new information; this will help achieve target end goals (one of which should be maintenance of public trust).

The PARN white paper also stated that trust fulfilled reinforces trust in the individual/profession. In other words, if you demonstrate trustworthy behaviour, people will assume that you will continue to be trustworthy.

The behaviour of individual members affects the perception of the entire profession. Some professions are considered more trustworthy than others because most of the members of that profession are considered trustworthy.

Professional bodies can help to enhance trust by providing balanced information on forestry, by ensuring competent professionals are practicing and by dealing with incompetent members quickly and comprehensively.

Results of our public opinion polling, which is conducted every couple of years, shows that both RPFs and RFTs are trusted by the public. We can't rest on our laurels, though. It is important that all members work hard to pursue public trust by practising the attributes of a trusted professional.



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Ensuring BC's Forests Are In Good Hands.