

Blue Ribbon Business

Business Management and Leadership Topics for the Horse Industry



PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Horse Professional's Code of Conduct

Wow. Proposing a Code of Conduct for horse professionals could be a daunting task. Anyone who has been part of the horse industry for many years will recognize that it is a highly diverse industry. This diversity offers a tremendous wealth not only to those that are involved for a lifetime, but also to those who participate for a shorter term. But just as it provides us with endless opportunity, it can also be the jumping off point for differing opinions, the inability to unite, and industry division. Is it possible to propose a code of conduct that applies to all disciplines and all breeds? Maybe, maybe not. The underlying question for professionals is this: How do we want others, whether lifers or short-termers, to experience and regard the industry? This question has great depth to it. The answer may prove to be a key to industry survival.

People who have had bad initial experiences with a professional may tend to generalize that the experience is what they will find everywhere in the horse industry. You've probably heard someone along the line say, "Well, you know how horse people can be!" Though I have countered this statement on many occasions with, "Don't you think that any group or person can be that way," this statement speaks volumes. It connotes that their experience has been perhaps inconsistent at best, and dishonest, unfair, taken advantage of, negative and back-biting at worst. The fact of the matter is that one bad apple can spoil the whole bunch. Bad apples can be found in any environment, not just the horse industry. The way a professional in any industry treats their clients and prospects is really a reflection of that individual and not the industry as a whole, though a professional is seen as an "ambassador" for their industry.

More often than not, horse professionals are very hard working and passionate about their chosen career. The work requires long hours, varied climates and environments, and the ability to

work independently. In many instances there is no boss or supervisor to provide direction or support. With these considerations in mind, the proposed Code of Conduct is meant to serve as a motivator to horse industry professionals. When days have gotten too long and tempers may have grown short, when facing an uphill challenge, when stumbling over an obstacle that came out of nowhere, when countering any negative human frailties, think of part of the Code that helps to pull you through. Imagine that you are the host or hostess for a traveler who has signed on for a luxury trip. You don't know how long they are staying for, but you sure want them to be treated well, happy with their trip, and recommend their experience to others. You, your customers, and the horse industry as a whole will all be better for it in the long run.

1) Take the High Road – How do you handle gossip? The rumor mill is an ugly place, and the best way to handle it is to stay away from it. Opinions, off handed remarks, and competitive jealousy are the mark of a weak or insecure business. If someone else tempts you into such a conversation the best response is to withdraw. Saying that you won't comment on the topic is one way. Reminding that there is always more than one side to a story is another. In some circumstances you may be able to turn the situation around to the gossip – ask them how they know this to be true, did they have a first hand encounter or have they spoken directly with the subject of the gossip, and are they sure the situation is not taken out of context and misinterpreted. Bear in mind that most gossipers won't be convinced that their story could be wrong, off base, and/or just in poor taste.

How do you handle requests for referrals to other horse businesses? And how do you deal with it when the request deals specifically with a business that has a mixed reputation? One way to deal with this is to develop a list of horse business peers that you are comfortable referring to. Perhaps you all agree to refer to one another as a professional courtesy and networking circle. Then

simply state that this is the group you can happily refer to. If pressed beyond that, state that you don't know enough about the other businesses to make a referral. Another method for making referrals is to provide education to the inquirer. Many articles have been written about how to find a good trainer, instructor and riding facility. As a means to educate the public, you can keep copies of these articles available to hand out or mail. Be sure to ask the source for permission to distribute the article in this fashion.

2) Seek Win/Win Solutions – In most situations where there is conflict, there are more possible solutions than “I win, you lose.” Take a step back from your position. This is not easy to do. Then evaluate what you are looking for, and what the other person is looking for. There are probably ways both of you can be accommodated. Make the suggestion that there are other solutions that you both haven't considered, and take some time to explore what they might be. Try to think about it like this: I will be happy if this happens AND you will be happy if this happens, rather than I will be happy OR you will be happy but one of us has to give up. Using AND often changes perspectives enough to find a good solution for both.

3) Be Mindful of What You Project - As a horse industry professional you are a role model, whether you are aware of that or not. People look up to you and they want to emulate you. Remember too, that this principle works both ways – they either want to be like you or they point you out as an example of what not to do. The quote “If you can't be a good example, you'll have to stand as a horrible warning” states this principle very succinctly.

4) Have an Open Mind - Encounter other aspects of the industry from a learning perspective. Though you have your preference and expertise in discipline, breed, etc., it's a big horse world with much to be gained by learning from others. A learning attitude gets others to let their guard down as well, so you may communicate to one another synergistically rather than defensively. More opportunities open to you this way as well.

5) Keep the Promises You Make – Whether verbal or as part of your advertising, deliver what you say you can. If you can't deliver it, don't promise it. Think about the story of The Emperor's New Clothes. If you make grandiose statements that you can't back up about your facility, your programs, your breeding stock, or your skills, the public will see in short order that the emperor is naked.

6) Share Your Career Passion – Work to entice newcomers into the wonderful world of horses. This can be done through your horse business and/or through horse associations you may be a member of. Open Barns, speaking opportunities about the enchantment and enrichment horses offer, field trips for the local schools to a horse fair, show or other event all help to spread the good word.

Be a mentor to junior riders, trainers, and horse caretakers. Today's youth is tomorrow's future.

Offer neighborly support to a fellow professional that may be getting started. Remember that the pieces of the pie don't necessarily all get carved smaller when a new horse business opens. The pie more often becomes bigger.

7) Expand Your Knowledge of the Industry as an Industry- Time after time people are surprised to hear the importance the equine industry has in the US economy. Can you relate this information to others? If you make all or part of your living with horses, understanding the economics, as well as legislative, regulatory, environmental, and health and welfare issues that the industry faces as a whole is a professional responsibility. If we aren't aware of the industry and ready to participate in it, someone else will have the chance to make our decisions for us – and their choices may stand in opposition to ours.

8) Look Before You Leap, Listen Before You Speak – Make informed decisions about your horse business. Take the time to do adequate research when considering how to grow. After all, you don't know what you don't know, but you are apt to discover much of it through investigation. No one sets out to make bad decisions, but jumping in without doing your homework can set the stage for just that. A thoughtful approach, listening as you go, will give more weight to your words and actions.

9) Give Back to the Industry – Find a cause and get behind it. Whether it be helping your breed or sport association, volunteering to work with youth, therapeutic, or at-risk populations, contributing efforts to a rescue shelter, or participating with your state horse council your time and professional experience will be greatly appreciated. The rewarding relationships and networks you create this way may surprise you.

10) Take Good Care of Yourself! – You can't offer the best you've got to give if you never take a little time off. Horse industry work can easily consume many hours, day after day after day. It is up to you to schedule a few minutes of down time for yourself. You will be far more productive if you are refreshed than if you are burned out. Remember to structure your schedule in a way that recognizes that you've got to get up tomorrow and do this all over again.

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