Create a Good Impression: Professionalism in Nursing

A nursing career is a journey that begins with nursing school and passing the NCLEX-RN®. Along the way, there will be many opportunities for job interviews and for meeting fellow nurses, staff managers, and other healthcare workers. You may attend conferences and workshops to stay current on health care issues affecting you and your patients. A positive and professional image is crucial to a successful nursing career and in benefiting from these interactions and experiences.

By Stacy E. Larson
Creating and maintaining a professional image means more than personal appearance; effective communication skills and a professional attitude are also crucial. Your ability to communicate is vital to productive interactions that benefit patients and the nursing profession. For example, my employer, Children’s Medical Center Dallas, teaches new nurses to care for the patient and for the family. As one of the top pediatric hospitals in the nation, nurses at Children’s are challenged to provide the best care possible while constantly learning more about the profession.

Nursing school

Begin developing your professional image while still in school. Your professors have worked at hospitals and may help you network or develop connections to secure your ideal job. Act mature in class, work hard on assignments and demonstrate professionalism.

When you step through hospital doors for a clinical or externship, you are representing your school, and, more importantly, yourself. Arrive on time, be prepared and seek out learning opportunities. Clinical time is best spent on learning skills and finding your niche in nursing as well as looking for your future employer or discovering a specialty interest.

An externship allows you to demonstrate your skills and get your foot in the door. My externship helped teach me important clinical skills and allowed me to personally interact with other nurses, physicians, patient families and patients. While the externship may seem like a prolonged interview, it also is an opportunity to interview others to see if you and the hospital are a good fit. Portraying a positive image during the interview process is important. When your clinical time ends, express gratitude to those who have helped you by sending thank-you notes.

Job interviews

The job interview process begins when you meet a nurse recruiter or nurse manager for the first time, perhaps at a conference, hospital, or school. Remember to make a good first impression. If you know that a nurse recruiter is coming to speak to your class, dress appropriately and be prepared to ask good questions to show you are interested. While attending a professional conference, dress professionally, bring résumés and be prepared to interact with nurses on all levels. The National Student Nurses’ Association’s Annual Convention and MidYear Conference both provide excellent opportunities for networking.

Physical appearance may not seem like the most important part of an interview, but it will factor into the first impression the interviewer has of you. A conservative suit is recommended; chances are the nurse recruiter will be dressed similarly. An interviewer might be more likely to consider you if you make a good first impression.

Spend time before your interview researching the hospital where you are applying. This can be easily accomplished on the internet. Become familiar with the mission statement and how you will help fulfill its values and vision. Be prepared ahead of time with answers to potential interview questions.
questions. Being prepared will help you communicate more effectively with the potential employer. Think about what you are looking for in the workplace, and ask questions to find out if it is the right place for you. Shake hands and make eye contact with every individual you meet. Act professionally to everyone with whom you interact, from the administrative assistant to the recruiter and manager to demonstrate a competent and professional image. Remember to send thank you notes indicating your interest, and highlight aspects of the hospital and position that fit your skills and interests.

Your new job

Your first nursing job will be filled with many challenges and learning experiences. A positive attitude will get you started on the right foot. Always be open to learning new tools and techniques. Present yourself as a new, confident nurse interested in learning and being part of a team. At Children’s Medical Center Dallas, for example, our experienced team includes nurse practitioners, medical students, residents and attending physicians. A multidisciplinary approach to patient care requires good teamwork and helps hospitals fulfill their missions to make life better for their patients.

Get to know your co-workers because they will have a large influence during your first few months on the job. Learn the right way to do things and stick to the correct techniques, which will create good work habits throughout your career. Communicate clearly with your manager, educator and/or preceptor about your strengths, weaknesses and concerns.

Experienced nurses are a great source of information and can help you feel more comfortable. Make sure to introduce yourself to everyone you meet, and learn all about the hospital to respond to questions from patients and their families about your institution.

Staying current and remaining involved

Getting involved in organizations, reading journals and continually seeking out new information will keep you current on the nursing profession. Several professional organizations offer discounted membership rates for new graduates. Also consider joining state nursing and specialty organizations and begin online research before graduation. Many organizations will allow students to attend meetings as observers.

As a nurse, your education will never end. Organizations offer opportunities to meet experienced nurses who can share their wisdom, as well as other new nurses going through similar experiences. When you join an organization you are representing your hospital, so be sure to always present a positive and professional demeanor.

In addition to outside organizations, don’t forget about your own institution. Seek out committees in your unit or hospital. Many hospitals support the advancement of nurses both clinically and personally. This support demonstrates the hospital’s belief in the profession of nursing and the importance of continuing education. Express your ideas in a positive manner, and try to offer possible solutions to problems or issues. Hospitals offer educational committees, organizational committees and opportunities to participate in health fairs or to host charity events. All of these are great opportunities to meet coworkers and represent your unit and hospital. Your participation in NSNA has helped you prepare for this level of involvement.

A positive image is essential to being a nurse. You will spend time with patients, families, managers and the public. Nursing is an incredibly challenging profession. It is important for the public to view nurses as competent, educated critical thinkers who want to contribute to their communities. By portraying a positive image in all aspects of your life, beginning with nursing school and continuing throughout your nursing career, you will help to advance the profession of nursing.

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For more information, check out these sources:

Dress to Impress: Secrets of Proper Attire, The Career Center, Florida State University
career.fsu.edu/ccis/guides/attire.html

Proper Business Attire and Etiquette – Presenting the Complete Package
tcbsolutions.net.phtemp.com/Proper_Attire_and_etiquette_for_men_and_women.pdf

Business Casual Attire, Career Services @ Virginia Tech
www.career.vt.edu/jobsearc/buscasual.htm