

**THE PROFESSIONAL BANDWIDTH:
“Do You Know the Parameters of Your Public Zone?”**

By Mary E. Rauch
www.maryrauch.com

“Help! I’m apologizing for my employees every time a prospective client walks into the office on Friday. This is embarrassing. What can I do about it!”

I still hear this comment at least once a week from leaders of companies who question “how low can they go on Friday?”

When I first began conducting Professional Demeanor Seminars for companies in 1988, a major concern for those who hired me was Professional Dress in the workplace.

The introduction of Casual Friday had just been introduced into the workplace, as a backlash against the buttoned down expectations of formal, corporate dress: a uniformed world of navy suits, white shirts, and blue ties—men and women—sometimes referred to as the “IBM or FBI look.”

The reasons for this shift from the FBI uniform to a more relaxed dress code have been analyzed extensively: more women in the workplace, generational differences, greater emphasis on egalitarianism, Dilbert, even cubicle culture: if you can’t have your own desk space, you could at least dress comfortably.

The down side of this freedom of choice was the slippery slope phenomenon: the more casual the dress one week, the more casual it would be the next, until no one could distinguish between Casual Friday and Saturday- Morning-Mowing- the -Lawn Dress.

In order to depersonalize this subject (for this can be a sensitive area to handle in a public seminar), I created a concept in my seminars I labeled "The Professional Bandwidth"—a graphic spectrum with hash marks running between two extremes-- "Very Casual" (workout clothes) to " Very Formal" (my son's wedding).

In the middle, between the two extremes, are two bold hash marks in different colors from the rest, labeled "Casual" to "Formal"—The Professional Zone.

This is The Professional Bandwidth out of which we do not step when in our Public Zone—(our professional vs. our private worlds.) Of course, I offer many examples from both ends of the spectrum, the attendees supply their own horror stories of unprofessional dress, and everyone has a good laugh or two.

In the end, however, everyone leaves with a very clear, specific, and conscious understanding of what “fits” and where it fits on the Professional Bandwidth. And many leave with a commitment to change—change their closets, change the size of their clothes (this is usually up, not down!), change the condition of their shoes, even quit biting their nails!

The theme of this segment of my Professional Demeanor Seminars is this: “Clothing is not just clothing. It is Surface Language. It is a strategic choice made every day by each of us. Choose Wisely. Choose Well. It Matters.”

Over the last few years, I’ve extended The Professional Bandwidth concept far beyond appropriate dress in the workplace. I’ve discovered the Bandwidth is invaluable when discussing such topics as language, appropriate conversations; hallway, elevator, break room, and reception area behavior; conflict resolution, and technology etiquette.

Whatever the corporate circumstance or challenge, the Professional Bandwidth Concept seems to apply.

But the question remains: why do these “crossovers”—or “slips”—occur in the first place?

Most of us cross the boundaries of Public Zone Behavior for several reasons:

1. The corporate culture allows it; some even encourage it
2. No one is modeling the desirable behavior
3. It's easier not to stay within the framework (the two essentials of Professional Bandwidth are awareness and discipline)
4. Bad habits have become the norm
5. We are oblivious of this concept. No one ever talks about it (everyone just notices)

Or, on a more positive note, "Freedom of Expression" and creativity are more valued in the corporate culture than "looking professional."

However, when company leadership sees a discrepancy between how employees behave, what they wear, how they converse in public spaces (including airports) and compare these realities to the way they want to be perceived as a company, they often call and request the Professional Demeanor seminar.

Here are a few examples of real changes individuals have chosen to make after attending the Professional Demeanor seminar and taking The Professional Bandwidth to heart.

- A woman in a high stress company who chewed gum all day—snapping and popping her way down the hallways, on the phone, during meetings (even blowing bubbles!)—went gum free.
- A man surreptitiously dipping snuff (he only thought no one noticed because management had decided not to confront

him) committed to going “cold turkey” and ridding himself of “that nasty habit” (his words)

- A leadership team—when working alone “behind closed doors” -- competed to tell the most off color or sexist jokes they had recently heard. After all, it was “behind closed doors.” But all their secretaries knew....so everyone knew. This long-held knowledge came out during their Professional Demeanor seminar. An instant fix! And embarrassed leadership.
- A man decided to clean up his language during in-house meetings (he was among “family,” so he felt he could use any language his generation accepted and he was comfortable with). Then he made a particularly grievous slip of word choice during an offsite visit, for now it (word choice) had become habitual. An “oops” moment. A Professional Bandwidth slip. A lost customer.
- A woman admitted: “I’ve never once thought about what I wear to work each day. I wear whatever is clean, and I know sometimes it’s inappropriate...but it’s easy and it’s clean.” She decided to show more professional awareness concerning her dress, to see it as “surface language,” and acknowledge what her dress was saying about her, she didn’t want to hear. Time to go shopping and launder clothes more often. Another easy fix.
- A man with a booming voice was known for having angry calls with customers with his office door open....and his desk facing the door and hallway. Obviously, anyone walking by, including potential NEW customers, could hear the tone and content of his conversation. Not good. Oops. Bandwidth Slip. He decided on his own to be more discreet (discretion and tact are major components of the Professional Bandwidth) AND to close his door and lower his voice. One of the simplest fixes of all. All it took was awareness and the few moments to get up, close the door, lower one’s voice, and use more diplomatic language.

The list could go on and on, from people changing their voice mail messages, their writing and editing of emails, their behavior and conversations in the break-room, or even the design of their PowerPoint slides.

The Professional Bandwidth covers all the territory—from technological etiquette, to presentation, to using toothpicks in public—and to everything in-between. It is not just about Professional Dress in the Workplace. It is all the “professional water” we swim in.

When we enter the Public Zone, we cannot pretend we are still in our Private Zone. Some things change; some things we relinquish; some things we take on. But we are always in a state of greater awareness.

Mary E. Rauch is Communication Strategist, Public Speaker, and Seminar Leader in San Antonio. You can learn more about her at her web site www.maryrauch.com