

SUBJECT TO CHANGE

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"I tell ya, I don't get no respect." It was a mantra of comedian Rodney Dangerfield's stage persona, and considering the strange antics of the character he presented, the audience probably wasn't too surprised that he got no respect. He seemed like a guy who didn't deserve it.

Lifeguards too, sometimes feel like they get no respect. Despite the critical public safety nature of the job, in many communities lifeguards are seen as second class providers in the world of public safety, often receiving less funding and attention than police, firefighters, and emergency medical services. In some cases, lifeguards even take a back seat to park maintenance and beach cleaning.

In the area of salaries too, lifeguards are generally paid less than other public safety providers. Even in areas where year-round lifeguards provide all manner of public safety services, only a few lifeguards are paid at a level commensurate with other public safety employees.

All-in-all, it can be a frustrating reality for those of us who dedicate ourselves to protecting the public along the beaches and waterways of America. Sometimes however, we can be our own worst enemies.

It often seems as though police and firefighters need to do little to engender public respect. Even in the wake of occasional embarrassing mistakes, few people in any community wish to see their police or firefighting staffs reduced. For lifeguards however, the image to some members of the public we serve is as seasonal icons of the beach with an easy, relaxing job, distant in nature from the professionalism of other safety providers.



This image is subject to change. Wages can be raised. Equipment can be improved. Staffing levels can be enhanced. All of this though, takes a genuine willingness on the part of lifeguards to take the steps necessary to improve their image.

Uniforms are one very visible image enhancer, but many lifeguards seem to shun them as uncomfortable or inconvenient. Even some whose agencies have provided attractive and consistent uniforms seem to change out of them with regularity, preferring to display their physically fit bodies instead of the professional symbols of their agencies. Yet one rarely sees a police officer or firefighter out of uniform.

Demeanor is also critical, especially considering the extraordinarily high visibility of lifeguards on elevated platforms. Is the lifeguard lounging or sitting ramrod straight? Is the lifeguard eager to assist the person in need of attention for a minor problem, or reluctant to be disturbed? Is the lifeguard

using time on the beach to socialize, or watching the water vigilantly at every moment? These things are noticed by the public we serve and they all contribute to public perception.

Police and firefighters are on duty, or at least available to respond, 24-hours a day in most communities. Not so for most lifeguard agencies. In some areas, seasonal beach use patterns may understandably influence reduced off-season staffing levels, but what about staffing levels during peak season? How can lifeguards justify leaving their beaches during hours of the day when beach users remain? How can arbitrary closing hours of 5 or 6 p.m. be justified? If lifeguards wish to be taken seri-

ously as public safety professionals, then they must take steps to ensure they are available when the public needs them, not just when it is convenient to themselves or their employers. All beach lifeguard administrators should work to implement scheduling strategies that have been effectively employed to improve coverage, like adjusted schedules and staggered shifts. What lifeguards and lifeguard agencies should avoid doing is maintaining the status quo purely because it is the easiest course. Our priority must be the safety of those we serve if we are indeed to be considered public safety professionals.

If we, as lifeguards, make decisions about our actions based primarily on the welfare of the public, our motives will be respected all the more by that public. If we take steps, sometimes uncomfortable steps, to present a professional image at every possible

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moment, we will increasingly be perceived as professionals. If we adapt our practices to maximize the public good, the public will respect our intentions all the more.

These are not secrets. They are typical of steps taken by other public safety providers, which have enhanced their image and cemented their position in their communities. They are available just as readily to lifeguards willing to act in a manner which moves them forward.

Ultimately, we as lifeguards control our own destiny. Our equipment, pay, staffing, and the like, are a reflection of public acceptance of the job we do based on the image we present. That image is within our control.

Editor's Note: This article was published in the American Lifeguard Magazine in 1997 and the issue of public image couldn't be more relevant to the profession today. I asked Mr. Brewster to reflect on the progress we have made over the past decade as it relates to image and professionalism. Here are his comments:

When I first got involved in lifesaving in San Diego in 1979 and came to learn of the degree of day to day dramas that were being resolved by lifeguards, I became pretty frustrated that the news media spent so much time on routine police and fire incidents on days when much more dramatic lifeguard incidents had taken place. Part of this was logistical, in that you can't get a camera crew to the beach in time to film most rescues, but part was based on ignorance, because the local news sells drama and if they knew of it or had the chance to film it, they would. I spent a lot of time working to get the news media interested in what we did, informed when major incidents happened, and fed the information they needed, when and how they needed it.

That process, alone, increased our profile, the respect we received in the community and the pay, benefits, and equipment we got. It wasn't that our work was better. It was that people were made aware of how important it was. The media is showing an increasing interest, locally and nationally, in lifesaving, usually to our benefit.

Image is a similar story. Many lifeguards have the opinion that since they are paid less than other safety service workers, they shouldn't have to work as hard to look professional at every moment. Add to that that our work attracts a lot of younger workers, this being one of, if not their first job. Immaturity, laziness, etc. have an impact. The vast majority of these people, when called, will perform admirably. It's in between that they can inadvertently revert to unprofessional conduct or appearance thereof, to the detriment of themselves and their fellow lifeguards. More and more agencies though, are adopting uniform policies that dictate a consistent, presentable appearance similar to our fellow public safety providers. We have a way to go though.

Ultimately, it is the perception of the public we serve that decides our pay, benefits, and the budget through decisions of elected leaders. To be well compensated, similar to police and fire, they have to perceive that the job we do is equally dangerous and arduous (and they will primarily glean this through the media), and they have to believe that we are deserving of the funds. The reality is that professional looking and acting people in crisp uniforms make the public feel they are getting their money's worth. The taxpayers actually take pride in the services they fund. Since this article first ran, there have been many examples on the

East Coast, West Coast, and throughout the USA of increased levels of professionalism paying benefits to the agencies that provided them, adding to the safety of those they watch over, and in fact benefiting all of lifesaving. But in many areas, lifeguard still walk off the beach, in high season, at 5 or 6 p.m., leaving beachgoers unprotected. And in many areas, male lifeguards continue to take off their uniform shirts, when they feel like it, to reap perceived adulation of some beachgoers, but with the likely result of setting us all back a notch.

Lifeguards need to remember that the actions of one impact the pay/benefits of all. As one example, in Huntington Beach, California, where one continuous strip of beach is divided into two jurisdictions, guarded on one end by lifeguards working for the City of Huntington Beach and the other by the State of California, most beachgoers probably have no idea of who the lifeguards work for. They just observe lifeguards at work at the beach. They may form their opinions on how the city lifeguards should be funded based on how well the state guards perform (not knowing the difference) and vice-versa. The fate of each is dependent upon the other. And thus our futures are inextricably intertwined.

For reasons such as these, we owe it to each other to be our best every day. In a very real sense, the image of one is the image of all. This is one of the reasons the Beach Patrol television series, for example, has such potential, if each lifeguard and each scenario featured can be one of lifesaving professionalism, for the reach of the media is exponential in its ability to inform and persuade.

– USLA President B. Chris Brewster