

What or Who is a Professional Photographer?

By Dr. Glenn M. Cope, CPP, M.Photog.,Cr., API, EA-ASP, F-PPO

Traditionally physicians, CPAs, lawyers, and teachers as well as other groups have been classified as professionals. But exactly what is a professional?

A “professional” indicates an occupational group distinguished from others by a group of standards and requirements:

1. **The possession of knowledge** of an art, science, or other body of knowledge that is not easily acquired. This knowledge allows the “professional” to provide a needed service to the community. Generally it is gained by education, wither by going to school or by education provided by professional organizations. A certification or some type of license establishes this knowledge and skill level of the individual. Photographers can become a “Certified Professional Photographer” (CPP) and this will provide the credentials for being a “professional.”
2. **A professional is a member** of national, state, and local “not-for-profit” associations or trade associations. The association provides certain support to the members:
 - Code of Ethics and some degree of enforcement. A professional follows a professional creed or code of ethics, which binds certain standards of behavior upon the individual and profession.
 - Continuing Education in the form of classes, publications, web sites, seminars, and conventions. Most professionals are required by law to have a specific number of hours of continuing education per year, but others have no such legal requirement. However, the top 10 percent in any professional group in income are those individuals who do more continuing education than the average individual in that field.
 - Certification. In the health fields this role as been assumed by governmental agencies. But the “Not-For-Profit” associations generally assist or provide this service where there is no state licensure.
 - Trade Relations. This is usually in the form of Trade Shows, advertising and web site links.
 - Legal support and education
 - Accounting and business support and education
 - Governmental lobbying
 - Opportunity to fellowship with other members
 - Benevolent activity or opportunity for members
 - Insurance and malpractice information and support
3. A professional has a certain dedication to public service.
4. A professional may or may not charge money. A professional has an intention or supports the intention of the profession as a way of making a living. However, a professional may choose to work “pro-bono” and not reflect on his or her professional classification.

Another way of looking at a “professional” is to ask the question, “Can I sue this person for not doing a “professional” job?” You can sue most anybody for almost anything. But you cannot sue just anybody for “malpractice.” That person has to be recognized by the industry as a “professional.”

MONEY?

People get “paid” for doing work! A person who digs a posthole for you gets paid, but that person is a laborer not a professional. Getting paid does not make you a professional. Being paid merely means that you are conducting a business or you are providing a service for hire. A photographer can be a “business owner” or an “artisan” and make money at the trade or craft of photography. But a “professional” meets the four the requirements mentioned above.

People can be classified by different types of work:

- Business owner
- Management
- Professional
- Craftsman
- Tradesman
- Journeyman
- Artisan
- Skilled worker or laborer
- Un-skilled worker or laborer

Role of Professional Associations

Membership in professional “Not-For-Profit” Associations is a critical element in establishing one’s credentials as a professional. For someone to say that they are a “professional” without such membership involves a total lack of understanding about what it means to be a professional. But this membership is only the first step in your credentials.

The Professional Photographers of America (PPA) and the Professional Photographers of Oklahoma (PPO) as “Not-for-Profit” Trade Associations provide the total package of benefits that are necessary for supporting a profession. Other only provide an auxiliary association for a professional as they do not provide professional credentials or the complete package of benefits.

Role of Certification

PPA Certification provides a firm basis for one’s credentials as a professional. PPA offers honorary distinctions such as the Photographic Craftsman, Master of Photography and others. PPA specifically states that these honors are for “internal” recognition among the membership. However, many photographers use these in advertising and promotion. But PPA states that Certification is the distinction that it will endorse for public recognition!

If we follow these guidelines that are found in business ethics, then who is a “Professional Photographer?”

1. This photographer has learned the science and craft of photography and is able to demonstrate it by “professional” standards. He or she has gained the status of a “Certified Professional Photographer” from the PPA.
2. One who provides a needed service for your community? This person operates a legal business, collects sales tax and pays the sales tax to the government. This person operates according to established ethical standards or Code of Ethics.
3. This photographer is a member of state and national “Not-For-Profit” trade associations?
4. This photographer participates in Continuing Education opportunities?

Is your photographer a professional?

The Continuing Story

With the advent of “smart” cameras many people get excellent results with little effort. Now advanced study and knowledge do not seem to be required to get excellent images. Maybe well-composed images may still be an arguable point, but the fact of the matter is that the first element of being a “professional,” that is, having an advanced understanding and education is easier than ever. Just the fact that technology is so advanced hits at the heart of being a professional—Because almost anyone can get good pictures—at least part of the time.

Because you charge money for your service, that makes you no different than any other laborer or at least an artisan. Charging money is not a requirement for being a professional. It only means at you are taking photos commercially or for-hire.

So it is more and more important to have professional credentials—Certification! Just because a person hangs out a sign saying, “I am a professional photographer”—does NOT make that person a “professional.” To be ethically correct you must back it up with memberships, certification, adhering to a Code of Ethics, and keeping up with continuing education.

What if we assume for a moment that technology could develop to the degree that a computerized robot could operate on a person to a degree better than a surgeon or at least as well. We might also assume that the robot would not make “human” errors. So would the surgeon stop being a professional — of course not! All the other elements that make a person a professional are still there. We would still need the physician to diagnose and make critical decisions.

A professional photographer is one who has the knowledge and experience to consistently produce great images. A professional is one who treats his or her occupation as a “profession.”

Credentials for Dr. Glenn M. Cope

CPP, (PPA Certified Professional Photographer)

M.Photos., Cr., (PPA Master of Photography and PPA Photographic Craftsman)

API, (PPA Approved Photographic Instructor)

EA-ASP, (The American Society of Photographers—Educational Associate)

F-PPO (Grand Fellow— Professional Photographer of Oklahoma)

Dr. Cope is a “Life” member of the PPA. He serves on the PPA Council, has served on different national/international committees as a member and chairperson.

He has served as the PPA liaison for Certification to Oklahoma for 20 years.

He is a “Life” member of the PPO. He serves on the PPO Board of Directors. He is a Past President of the PPO, He has served as chair for different committees.

Cope is the Past President for the International Association of Panoramic Photographers.

He is a member of other groups and associations.

Credentials for Barbara J. Cope

CPP, (PPA Certified Professional Photographer)

Cr. Photog. (PPA Photographic Craftsman)

Barbara is a “life” member of the PPO.