



# Are You a Vendor?

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MAPPS PRESIDENT

Like many of you, I am an educated individual and a licensed professional. I spent many years on my education and a considerable amount of time in training and experience to get where I am today. That is why when I hear the professionals in this community referred to as "vendors" it has the same affect as someone running their fingernails down a blackboard. It's even worse when I hear professionals in this community refer to themselves as "vendors."

This is a pet peeve that has festered for many years and that I am constantly reminded of when reading publications in our field, attending professional conferences (MAPPS included), and even conversing with my own partners and employees during the course of conducting my daily practice.

Toward understanding why as professionals we don't want to be labeled as vendors, one only needs to consider Webster's definition of vendor: "one who vends," and "vend" means "to sell especially as a hawk or peddler (and) to sell by means of vending machines." At several recent conferences I've asked audiences, "Would those who hawk or peddle their wares (surveys, maps, or geospatial data) by means of vending machines please stand?" This question usually gets some laughs, and of course no one stands up.

Since becoming president of MAPPS (the Management Association for Private Photogrammetric Surveyors, [www.mapps.org](http://www.mapps.org)) last summer, I have been developing a public information campaign for the membership of MAPPS and others practicing in the surveying, mapping, and geospatial community to focus attention on the issue of professional image. A wise man said, "If you would change the world, change yourself." Thus, as a professional and as president of MAPPS,

## What's In a Name?

you will not hear me use the word "vendor" but rather "professional service provider." I don't even consider the firms that provide the hardware and software tools of our profession as vendors, but more accurately, they are "equipment manufacturers."

### To continue my semantic lecture;

- Similarly, I will favor "profession" rather than "industry" and engage in "professional practice" over "business" that serves "clients" rather than "customers."
- Upon completing one's education, in our professions one serves an "internship" rather than an "apprenticeship."
- When competing for work, we submit "proposals," "offers," or "statements of qualifications" rather than "bids."
- We provide our clients "services" wherein the representation of our professional judgment (a map, survey plat, or GIS data) is a "deliverable" rather than a "product."

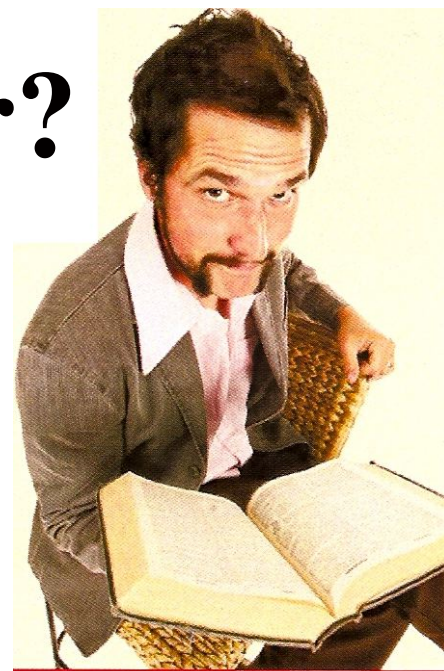
As you can tell, I am very passionate about using the proper words to describe who we are and what we do. Some of you might be asking yourself, what's the point of all of this? The point is that words have meanings and so we need to carefully choose the words that describe ourselves, because they ultimately define

how others will view us. This is why I am focusing my attention as MAPPS president on an effort to educate our clients, stakeholders, and members of our own community on the terminology we would like them to use in reference to our profession and why that terminology is different from commonly misused words such as "vendor."

In large measure, the misuse of the terminology listed above is a manifestation of the line attributed to the cartoon character Pogo: "We have met the enemy and he is us." We, the surveying, mapping, and GIS professionals of the United States, are often our own worst enemies. We often use terms like vendor, industry, bid, and customer to describe ourselves, and then we complain about the fact that we are not treated with the professional respect we think we deserve.

Let me cite a few examples demonstrating that words have specific meanings and that it is how we refer to ourselves and how others refer to us that could have considerable consequences.

During the Reagan Administration, ACSM and ASPRS were successful in having the job titles "land surveyor" and "photogrammetrist" removed from the Labor Department's List of Apprenticable Occupations. That was a major victory for the profession. But recently, Labor added occupations such as



"drafter, cartographic," "geospatial specialist," "photogrammetric technician," and "surveyor assistant instrument" to the apprenticeship list, without consulting ACSM, ASPRS, MAPPS, or other professional organizations in the field. There are serious implications regarding labor union organizing that could result from this inaccurate and harmful characterization.

When the federal government's initiative for high growth job training originally targeted the geospatial community as one of 14 areas where the U.S. economy will create a significant demand for new jobs in coming years, and after committing more than six million dollars to the geospatial career development infrastructure, the U.S. Department of Labor defined the geospatial community as "an information technology industry." Fortunately, a coalition of professional geospatial organizations including MAPPS was successful in changing this misuse of terminology.

The Internal Revenue Code defines surveying and mapping as part of the broad architecture and engineering (NE) field, not information technology, which qualifies certain firms to use cash-based accounting. Will re-classifying geospatial as part of information technology, rather than architecture and engineering, result in tens of thousands of dollars in new taxes on small surveying, mapping, and GIS firms in particular?

Similarly, most states that levy a sales tax apply such tax to products but not services. In those states, surveying, mapping, and related activities are considered professional services, exempt from sales tax. Would classifying geospatial as an "industry" in "information technology" result in new taxes on providing geospatial data to our clients? I would suggest that as legislators consider ways to raise revenue the answer to this question would have to be yes. Toward changing the way we are perceived, I would challenge every individual reading this article to look at your business cards, firm brochures, website, news releases, and even your invoices. Do they use the term "service" or "product," "profession" or "industry," and so on? If you are in a state that exempts services from sales tax, you had better be sure you are not erecting a gallows and putting your neck in a noose by

using words that imply you are selling a product.

From the aspect of professional liability coverage, the geospatial profession has long been considered part of the NE community by leading insurance companies. Classifying firms as "vendors" in an "industry" or as part of the "information technology industry" could potentially result in a new and higher risk and rating system, causing firms to lose their insurance coverage or face significantly higher premiums.

Another example of adverse consequences of inappropriate nomenclature is in government procurement. Surveying and mapping have long been considered part of NE in federal law such

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as the "Brooks Act," state law, and the American Bar Association Model Procurement Code for State and Local Government. These qualifications-based selection (OBS) statutes apply to professional AIE services, not products supplied by vendors in industries such as IT. The recent OBS litigation exposed a fundamental lack of understanding of state licensing, state law definitions of surveying, and procurement processes among members of several geospatial organizations who filed an amicus brief in Federal District Court in opposition to OBS, claiming that GIS and geospatial activities are not part of the broad architecture, engineering, surveying, and mapping field. It would be a disaster for our profession and the public we serve if government contracts at all levels were to be awarded on the basis of low price bids.

In many states, licensing as a surveyor or is tied to graduation from a surveying or engineering program accredited by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology/Engineering Accredita-

tion Commission. This system applies not only to boundary surveying, but also to mapping, photogrammetry, and other GIS and geospatial activities, inasmuch as many states and the NCEES Model Law now include these disciplines in the definition of surveying. I am concerned that classification of surveying and geospatial activities as vendors in an industry such as information technology will wreak havoc with university curriculum and accreditation.

For a number of years I taught a course on the Fundamentals of Photogrammetry as part of the GIS certificate program at North Hennepin Community College, in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. The class was designed to give the students a basic understanding of the processes, techniques, and tools used in the development of base map documents by photogrammetric methods. At the beginning of each course I stressed the importance of the photogrammetrist's role in providing geospatial data map documents to GIS practitioners. The course was developed on the premise that it is important to understand that all maps are not created equal and that knowing how the map was developed, for what purpose, and to what level of accuracy is critical for the GIS user.

During the course sessions, often the subject of the various professions involved with the development of base maps would come up. Early on, I mentioned that firms such as Aero-Metric employ licensed surveyors, certified photogrammetrists (ASPRS) licensed pilots, professional engineers, professional photogrammetric surveyors, certified mapping scientists, GIS/LIS professionals, etc. I also introduced my students to the numerous professional organizations that exist and made some of the professional journals required reading for the course.

In another required course, the students learn about surveying using GPS equipment. This tied to a segment in my class where we discussed ground control requirements for mapping projects using either conventional ground, GPS ground, airborne GPS, or a combination of these survey techniques. I cautioned students that just because they know how to use GPS equipment did not necessarily qualify them to go out and perform surveys



unless they were doing so under the supervision of a licensed professional. I explained the potential consequences to them and that the laws governing the practice vary from state to state.

Toward the end of the course I spent time with the students exploring and introducing the practice of using a qualification-based selection process for professional photogrammetric mapping services, but not before they understood the difference between a commodity and a service. To help understand the difference, I would have the students split up into two groups: one group developing a list of things you would need to know when buying a commodity and the other listing the characteristics required of a service provider. After each group had been given the opportunity to present their thoughts, I would ask them to consider what they had learned about photogrammetry and surveying and, if necessary, to debate whether the deliverables from a photogrammetric mapping project should be considered a commodity or a service. After five weeks of intense instruction on the rigors of a photogrammetric mapping project, the students were quick to conclude that professional judgment, experience, education, and references were all important characteristics to consider when selecting a firm for their geospatial data needs. I liked to joke that they should never try any of what they had learned in the course at home, but rather leave it to a professional.

I wrapped up this session with a discussion on the Brooks Act and how it applies to federal agencies as well as many state and local governments. I ended by stressing that photogrammetric mapping services are closely related to engineering and land surveying and, as such, could have a negative impact on the welfare and safety of the public if not performed correctly. Therefore, unlike a commodity where the exact requirements of color, size, quantity, etc. are easily defined making price an appropriate deciding factor, professional photogrammetric services need to be viewed as a requirement to provide a solution to a specific problem that involves incorporating numerous techniques and methodologies toward designing an approach that will achieve the maximum

desired results, thus the need to select a firm based on their qualifications.

Webster's defines a profession as "a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation," and a professional as "engaged in one of the learned professions." Is there any doubt that surveying, photogrammetry, GIS, and other geospatial disciplines are professions and that their practitioners are professionals?

Although "selling" in our free enterprise system is the common link between vendors and those professionals from all walks of life who offer their services for a fee, from the definitions provided by Webster's, it should be clear that the experience of purchasing an item from a vending machine or from a true vendor does not compare to that of sitting down with a group of cardiovascular surgeons to decide which one of them will perform your quadruple bypass. So is the surgeon a vendor because he or she is selling his many years of education, experience, and medical knowledge? The

bottom line is professionals come in all shapes and colors and include photogrammetrists, surveyors, GIS, and other geospatial professionals, none whom have I ever seen standing on a street corner "vending" their wares or selling them from machines to anyone who happens by.

Referring to our community of practice in terms such as "vendors," "industry," and others is not only factually incorrect but also an affront to our profession. Please join me in a campaign to set the record straight. ~

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