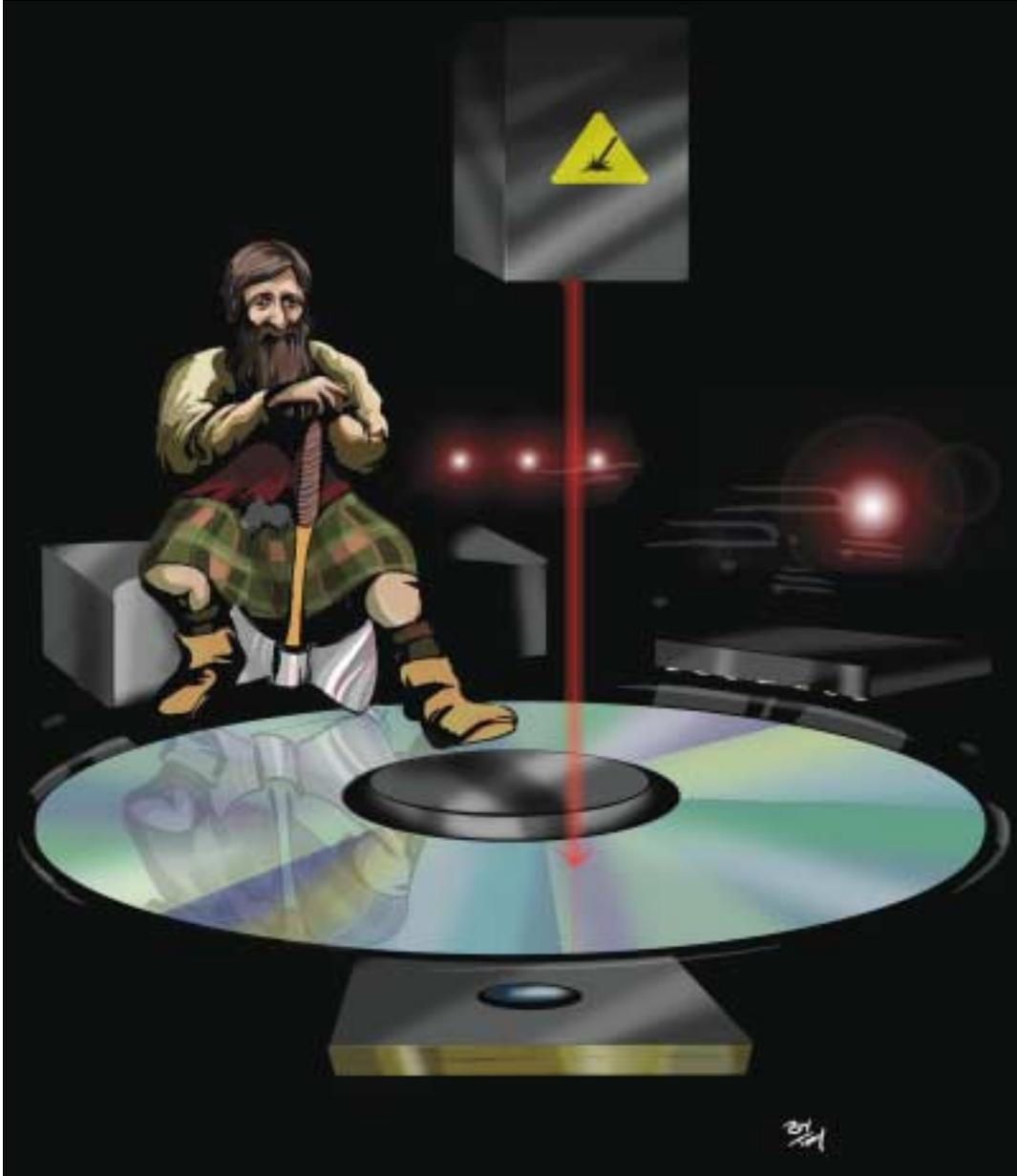


Professional or consumer?

Everyone uses the terms but everyone also seems to have a different interpretation of what they think they mean. **JOHN WATKINSON** explains and raises the professional standard.



ONE OF THE PROBLEMS with words is that they are only useful as means of communication if there is some consensus over what they mean. Otherwise they serve only to occupy idle bandwidth or to prevent silence; neither of which appeals to me greatly. I have always been fascinated by words and one of the great things about English is that it is not really a language at all, but a melting pot into which words from any number of other languages have been put on extended loan to join words that have been made up to fulfil a need. Ombudsman, cul de sac, influenza, macho, sputnik, are but a few examples of the former and quantisation, aliasing, precession and nutation are examples of the latter. How much more convenient to say automatic instead of *se mettre en marche*.

When writing it is important to maintain some kind of balance between, on the one hand, patronising the reader by using a small subset of the language based primarily on monosyllables and, on the other hand, using terminology that is so arcane that few can understand it. I have been reasonably good at treading this thin line over the years, although I have yet to have anything published in a tabloid. From the other side of the fence, how boring it is to read something in which you understand every word perfectly. How much better to find text that causes you to think and thereby extend your own knowledge. I fear that the present and regrettable trend of dumbing down is in the former category. When you have to write in such a way that no one could conceivably misunderstand, the result is

almost invariably lifeless and stultifying. When you have to read, or listen to, dumbed-down content a kind of protective veil comes down over the intellect and the vocabulary keeping it at arm's length from the mediocrity. As a counter measure, I have, of late, been consciously articulating up, that being the antithesis, if regrettably not the nemesis, of dumbing down.

All of which ponderous peregrinations brings me to the topic of consumer versus professional. As usual there are a number of ways of looking at the problem. You can be strictly practical and rely on facts and physics, or you can be pragmatic and consider what other people might make of it, or you can be entirely emotional about it.

Being practical, the distinction must be that a professional device is one that is being used in the course of someone's gainful work. If your livelihood depends on some piece of equipment then it is professional. In this case important aspects of the equipment concerned might include reliability and durability balanced against economy. These factors may outweigh sheer performance.

A good example is the London taximeter cabriolet, universally abbreviated to taxi. Performance is not outstanding, in fact a calendar might be substituted for the speedometer. The rear suspension is just resilient enough to prevent chassis damage, but it is durable and reliable. The XLR connector of motor cars, one might say. On the other hand, a consumer motor vehicle may have many other characteristics. The consumer may be anywhere on a scale from impoverished to profligate and may want a vehicle that is as cheap to run as possible or one that displays his status. Like audio equipment, below a certain price cars are built down to that price and are a false economy because they won't last or are impossible to service. On the other hand, above a certain price proper engineering gives way to emotional engineering. This term was coined by a chairman of Jaguar Cars and explains the principle very well. There is no engineering basis whatsoever on which to put a 12-cylinder engine in a road-going motor car, but Jaguar did exactly that and for quite a long time too. Clearly more is better, just as it seems to be with the number of channels you see on mixing consoles. Do they ever all get used, or are they there to impress the hell out of visitors? But I'm getting confused. Mixing consoles are supposed to be professional aren't they?

Another difficulty with this distinction is that the same exact piece of hardware can be professional or consumer depending on who uses it. My computer is professional because I'm writing this on it. Is it still professional when I'm using it personally?

The next way of considering the topic is in the terminology of marketing, where the goal is to appeal to the prospective purchaser not by putting forward anything useful like a specification, but instead by suggesting, usually obliquely, that ownership of the item concerned conveys an improved status, be that to be considered discerning by one's peers or to be successful with women. Maybe another distinction is that professional devices don't need to be dressed up, personalised or customised by accessories of dubious merit. The hot hatchback owner cannot live without bright red brake calipers, purple silicone hoses under the bonnet or neon lights that illuminate the road beneath the vehicle. The prospective purchaser is totally unmoved by the fact that the catalogues are full of scantily dressed women that are somehow drawn to these things. No difference really from the consumer hi-fi enthusiast who has to have oxygen-free speaker

cables capable of carrying 2000 amps and spikes under his speakers. Clearly no professional would get suckered into anything like that...

The term consumer carries a stigma. A consumer is a mindless automaton whose purpose is to act as a dummy load for factories. What better ploy than to capitalise on that by allowing the purchaser release from the purgatory of being a consumer. Childishly simple and adding nothing to the cost, you simply refer to the product as professional, or even just casually slip in the odd 'Pro' here and there. Then by buying the product, you immediately become a professional.

There aren't many ways of becoming a professional without studying, taking exams, getting qualifications and so on, except possibly in the audio industry. Soon all consumer products will be professional, just like all audio engineers. But then, some marketing type will realise that the term 'Pro' has become universal and indistinguishable from boring. A few million dollars of advertising will encourage us to think this way and a backswing against professional equipment will begin. A new term will be coined for this new generation of gear. Don't ask me what it is; you have to pay for that.

Perhaps in days of yore when audio equipment was analogue there would have been more of a distinction between consumer and professional. The consumer didn't need multi-generation performance but was more interested in economy and compactness. As a result consumer tape recorders ran at low speed on narrow tracks. Professional machines did the opposite. But the advent of digital audio did for all of that. A bit spends its whole day being a one or a zero, and doesn't have the information capacity to know or care whether it's a consumer bit or a professional bit.

DAT was supposed to be a consumer format, but for well-known reasons never became one and was transformed overnight into a professional format by telling the bits they had a new image. Of course it betrayed its consumer origins by having liner sheets in the cassette instead of little spools and we all know how reliable that is. Nowadays tape is getting harder to find. Multitrack production recorders are not consumer devices, but now I can have the equivalent on my desk. With the right software an Apple Mac can become a devastatingly powerful audio production system. Lines of code now perform processes that a few years ago required a specially made device that was not found outside of a recording studio.

All of the other definitions I have attempted above have ultimately failed. Digital audio combined with the power of marketing have together rendered the term 'professional' meaningless in connection with equipment. Thus all we are left with is this last one.

In my view, 'professional' is a term used to describe a way of working or a mind set. A professional outlook is one that stays on to solve a problem rather than going home when the clock says so. An approach that would prefer to squeeze just a little bit more excellence into something so it goes with a flourish rather than being run of the mill. Professionalism is an attitude of mind that might include having a good theoretical understanding of the subject, a practical understanding of how to make things work, a healthy cynicism regarding the snake oil vendors who would provide new clothes for the emperor, a sense of duty to the client or customer that rises above self indulgence or self aggrandisement, a willingness to pass on knowledge to those less experienced, and a willingness to learn something every day. ■