I’ve had several conversations recently about professionalism (in agriculture and specifically as it relates to CCAs), why people become certified, and the purpose of certification. All three are interconnected.

Professionalism is a primary reason why the CCA program got started 20 years ago. There was a strong desire to improve the professionalism of those who advise farmers on their agronomic practices and provide them with inputs. A profession ended up being defined through the creation of the certification. Today, CCAs are a recognized profession in agriculture, but did the certification program achieve its goal?

I would have to say yes and no. It was a goal of continuous improvement, not one with an end in mind. So I say yes—it has helped to improve professionalism, but it continues over time because we can always do better.

We have more than 13,000 CCAs who engage in continuing education and have adopted lifelong learning as part of who they are and what they do as professionals. CCAs are an influential group, representing $13 to $65 billion in sales revenue, averaging $1 to $5 million for each CCA annually. According to our surveys, the primary reason why CCAs become certified and maintain it is that it “conveys professionalism,” linking certification and professionalism. This is not unique to the CCA audience as it is true across professions.

Many professions started certification programs long before CCA for similar reasons. Certification recognizes individuals who can meet the predetermined standards providing end users such as farmers and employers a process to identify qualified people. There’s an assurance of competency, a deeper level of knowledge, initiative, and drive exhibited by certified professionals. A major seed company found a higher level of performance in certified professionals compared with non-certified individuals. This has the capability of leading to higher revenue for the client, employer, and CCA. Many over the years have questioned the value of being certified, and money ends up being a simple measurement tool. It may not be mentioned as a primary reason, but if someone’s performance is higher, you could conclude that they should be making more money.

Certification “conveys professionalism” only if they know about it. A CCA is in the best position to tell someone about being certified, but our survey tells us only 14% of the current CCAs heard about it from another CCA, and only 42% encourage a colleague or student to become certified. Shame on us! Building awareness is critical to building value, and the best way to build awareness is the certificated professional. Who do you ask when you want to learn something? You ask someone who is what you want to be or knows how to do what you want to do. Certification, you are the best person to tell people about it.

I’d like to encourage you to share your experiences in a positive way. Place the initials after your name every time you sign something or are quoted, and display the logo. Volunteer to speak about certification with students who are going to enter the profession upon graduation. Building awareness was sighted as a top priority for the ICCA office by the survey. In reality, we can only do so much, but together, we can achieve so much more. We’re not asking you to be an evangelist for the program, but to simply and positively explain it and share your experiences when asked. You have a lot of positive things to talk about, and there are numerous tools on the website that can assist you. You can access the tools by going to www.certifiedcropadviser.org and clicking on the promotional materials tab in the middle menu bar.