



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Real World Business Etiquette

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In today's "real-world" of digital communication and open-plan workspaces, business etiquette can be tricky. The business etiquette of today applies not only to the obvious areas—table manners, social graciousness like "please and thank-you," crisp personal image, a strong handshake and eye contact—but to a broad range of other fields including email, social media and even gadget-use.

New technologies are forcing exciting changes in the way we work and communicate, but the case for proper business etiquette is paramount. Among all these new etiquette rules, your guiding principle is to treat people with consideration and respect. The Golden Rule—treat others how you want to be treated—is as relevant today as when you first learned it. Keep that classic adage in mind to ensure you never stray far from the path of proper business etiquette and common sense.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Your personal image is essentially your own unique brand. The way you present yourself makes a statement to the world about your confidence, attitude and accomplishments. First impressions are almost impossible to reverse, making them extremely important. Always introduce yourself with a confident handshake. A firm handshake—made with direct eye contact—sets the stage for a positive encounter.

Networking can happen anytime and anywhere, so you need to always look the part of the professional. Establish a personal grooming routine and stick to it. Make sure your clothes are always clean and freshly pressed. Dressing appropriately is of the utmost importance. Professional attire, rather than business casual attire, should be worn for important meetings, networking events, conferences and interviews. Depending on your company culture, business casual attire is often appropriate for regular work days. When you dress in the morning, think about the possibility of a spontaneous lunch invite or meeting. You may want to consider keeping a "goes with anything" suit jacket or sport coat in the office for any impromptu meetings.

Always carry business cards and consider investing in a business card case to keep your cards crisp and clean. After any meeting or networking event, follow up to keep the conversation going. While the medium (email or postal mail) is up to you, consider that the note card is becoming less common and the extra effort of a well-written note can make a big impact.

TABLE MANNERS

Even in today's era of informality, good table manners are an essential element of business etiquette. Whether you're trying to impress your boss or a prospective employer has invited you to lunch, your table manners have never been under greater scrutiny. The rules of proper dining etiquette can be very involved, but these imperative basics will give you the foundation for success.

- If getting up from the table during the meal, place your napkin on your chair, rather than on the table.
- Always pass to the right.
- Never separate the salt and pepper shakers. They should pass as a pair.
- Don't chew with your mouth open or speak with food in your mouth.
- Use the utensils from the outside in.
- When you finish eating, place your knife and fork across your plate pointing to 11 o'clock.
- Don't order messy foods that are difficult to eat.
- Keep your elbows off the table while eating.

If you are hosting the meal, put some thought into choosing the restaurant. Aim for something nice, but not overly expensive. Choose a restaurant you know, if possible. You may even want to call ahead and request a quiet table away from the kitchen or host stand. Inform the host upon arrival that you will be taking care of the bill.

For any business function, but especially for small dining meetings, it's helpful to come prepared with



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CONTINUED ON PAGE 28



a few casual, non-business conversation topics in mind. This will help avoid any awkward silences. Also, remember to always be courteous to wait staff; your fellow diners will see it as a reflection of your graciousness, business poise and good manners.

IN-OFFICE ETIQUETTE

With a constant barrage of distractions from emails, phone calls and colleagues dropping by, it can sometimes be difficult to hunker down and actually get some work accomplished. When you need a few minutes with a coworker to brainstorm or discuss a project, consider calling or emailing in advance to ask if you can meet at an appointed time. This gives your coworker some advance warning, so he/she is not expected to drop everything and shift focus on a whim.

Give your coworkers and colleagues the benefit of life's common courtesies. Always arrive on time and prepared for meetings. Clean up after yourself in the company kitchen and never help yourself to any goodies stored in the office refrigerator without first confirming that they are meant to be shared.

ELECTRONIC ETIQUETTE

In today's hyper-connected business world, it's crucial that you maintain a high level of professional etiquette. While you may not have considered it before, the way you conduct yourself online and even the way you use your electronic gadgets has a real impact on your personal image. Your "digital footprint" is lasting and is a critical piece of your personal brand.

If you're using social media sites for professional ventures, always maintain a professional edge. Your profile is the equivalent of your résumé, your appearance or your elevator pitch and should be crafted with care. Highlight your skills and talents to further your brand and demonstrate your value to fellow networkers, recruiters and potential employers. And while you might look great in your favorite shot from last month's vacation, good business etiquette calls for a distinguished headshot. All of our gadgets—iPhones, BlackBerrys and iPods—call for their own proper etiquette rules. We're all tempted to check and respond to emails the instant we receive them. However, consider how these actions come across in a meeting or during a conversation with a coworker. It is rude and disruptive, and your message portrays disinterest. Always turn off your phone or at least switch it to silent mode before any meeting or event. In that same vein, refrain from popping in your headphones and tuning out the moment you cross the office threshold at the day's end. Elevators and hallways are prime spots for friendly, positive interactions with colleagues. Save the tunes for the commute and use those little opportunities effectively.

Digital communication is permanent and public! Once you have posted a tweet, texted or sent an email, there is no taking it back. So, proofread, proofread, proofread! One of the easiest ways to look sloppy and unprofessional is to distribute information with grammatical and spelling errors. Along those same lines, keep your emails straightforward and free of sarcasm. It is difficult to convey tone via email, and

without tone your message can have dual meanings. While emoticons might seem like an easy way to lighten the tone of your email, they come across as immature and are best saved for your personal communications. Remember to think twice before sending a heated email. If you are tempted to fire off an angry or emotional message, compose it in a word document first so you don't accidentally hit send before you've really thought things through.

In essence, business etiquette is a key differentiator and thus a means of maximizing your business potential. Although we are living and working in

an increasingly informal environment, decency, respect and good manners are still important. So, do what you say you're going to do, live up to your promises, and always treat people with respect. Follow these guidelines to distinguish yourself and to raise the bar on what business success means today. ●