



## The Etiquette Edge

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**“Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect, to those that are present.” George Washington**

## Business Etiquette

**A**s your career progresses, you develop skills which are respected and expected—professional etiquette!

Business etiquette is made up of significantly more important things than knowing which fork to use at lunch with a client. Unfortunately, in the perception of others, the devil is in the details. If you can't be trusted not to embarrass yourself in business and social situations, people tend to equate a lack of etiquette with a lack of the care and self-control necessary to be good at what you do. Etiquette is about presenting yourself with the kind of polish that shows you can be taken seriously. Etiquette is also about being comfortable around people and making them comfortable around you!

Formerly perceived as soft skills, busy, result oriented professionals have found that professional etiquette influences their success because it:

- Differentiates them in a competitive market.
- Honours commitments to quality and excellence.
- Enables them to be confident in a variety of settings with a variety of people from all walks of life.
- Modifies distracting behaviours and develops admired conduct.

Most behaviour that is perceived as disrespectful, discourteous or abrasive is unintentional, and could have been avoided by practicing good manners or etiquette. We've always found that most negative experiences with someone were unintentional and easily repaired by keeping an open mind and maintaining open, honest communication. Basic knowledge and practice of etiquette is a valuable advantage, because in a lot of situations, a second chance may not be possible or practical.

### **Business Etiquette ?More Than Just Eating With The Right Fork The Opportunity**

People are a key factor in your own and your business success. Many potentially worthwhile and profitable alliances have been lost because of an unintentional breach of manners.

### **The Solution**

There are many written and unwritten rules and guidelines for etiquette, and it certainly behooves a businessperson to learn them. The caveat is that there is no possible way to know all of them!

These guidelines have some difficult-to-navigate nuances, depending on the company, the local culture and the requirements of the situation. Possibilities to commit a faux pas are limitless and chances are, sooner or later, you'll make a mistake. When in doubt, stick to the basics.

## The Basics

The following are guidelines and tips that we've found helpful for dealing with people in general, in work environments and in social situations.

### It's About People

Talk and visit with people. Don't differentiate by position or standing within the company. Secretaries and building maintenance folks have tremendous power to help or hinder your career. Next time you need a document prepared or a conference room arranged for a presentation, watch how many people are involved with that process (you'll probably be surprised) and make it a point to meet them and show your appreciation.

Make it a point to arrive ten or fifteen minutes early and visit with people that work near you. When you're visiting another site, linger over a cup of coffee and introduce yourself to people nearby. If you arrive early for a meeting, introduce yourself to people nearby. If you arrive early for a meeting, introduce yourself to the other participants. At social occasions, use the circumstances of the event itself as an icebreaker. After introducing yourself, ask how they know the host or how they like the dip. Talk a little about yourself ?your hobbies, kids or pets, just enough to get people to open up about theirs and get to know you as a person.

### The Workplace The Phone

Businesses can no longer function without telephones. Yet few of us learned the proper way to place and answer calls. Telephone manners are very important.

The author Fran Lebowitz said, "As a teenager you're in the last stage of your life when you will be happy to hear that the phone is for you." Telephone calls are an intrusion into someone's workday. At the beginning of the call, ask if the person has a few minutes to talk to you. Forget those old bromides about making small talk and building rapport before getting to the point of your call. Know why you're calling before you ever dial, and get to the point. Wasting someone's time is rude.

Identify yourself and speak clearly into the phone ?never chew gum, eat, drink or smoke while using the telephone and tell them the basic nature of your call. That way, you'll be sure you're getting the right person or department and the person you're trying to reach will be able to pull up the appropriate information and help you more efficiently.

If you encounter someone's voice mail, state your name, organisation, and reason for calling and slowly give your telephone number. Many people will leave a very good clear message and then quickly rattle off their phone number.

Voice mail is most efficient if you leave a concise but detailed message. Many times the person receiving the call will be able to get the information you need and leave that in their return call or message to you. Use voice mail wisely and efficiently. Always have a concise, professional greeting on your answering machine/voice mail.

Always return calls. Even if you don't yet have an answer to the caller's question, call and explain what you're doing to get the requested information or direct them to the appropriate place to get it.

Answer the phone with the same enthusiasm or at least warmth, even if you ARE being interrupted, the person on the other end doesn't know that!

You don't have to reply to obvious solicitations. If someone is calling to sell you something, you can indicate that you are not interested and hang up without losing too much time on it. However, you do need to be careful. You may be receiving a call from an insurance or long distance company that wants to hire you as a consultant! Be sure you know the nature of the call before you (politely, of course) excuse yourself.

If you're holding an important meeting in your office, don't answer unless you're expecting an important call. Then apologise to those present for the interruption, should you decide to pick up the phone.

Personalize the conversation. Many people act in electronic media (including phone, phone mail and email) the way they act in their cars. They feel since they're not face to face with a person, it is perfectly acceptable to be abrupt, crass or rude. We need to ensure that we make best use of the advantages of these media without falling headfirst into disadvantages.

### **FAX**

Never tie up someone's line or waste his or her paper by sending an unsolicited FAX unless it is urgent. And never, ever send a resume by FAX unless it was requested. When you send a FAX always include a cover letter stating the total number of pages, the date, who it is to, who it is from and your telephone and fax number in case there are problems with the transmission.

### **E-mail**

Make the subject line specific. Think of the many messages you've received with the generic subject line, "Hi?" or "Just for you."  
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Don't forward messages with three pages of mail-to information before they get to the content. In the message you forward, delete the extraneous information such as all the "Memo to," subject, address and date lines.

When replying to a question, copy only the question into your email, and then provide your response. You needn't hit reply automatically, but don't send a bare message that only reads, "Yes." It's too blunt and confuses the reader. Address and sign your emails. Although this is included in the To and From sections, remember that you're communicating with a person and not a computer!

And lastly, always respond to a real business message, whether it is to invite you to a meeting, or to provide information you requested.

It's also believed that the more serious the message, the less appropriate email becomes as a medium. It has a reputation for informality. Also never deliver bad news of any kind through email, like a letter of resignation or serious complaints.

### **Interruptions**

Avoid interruptions (of singular or group work sessions, meetings, phone calls or even discussions) if at all possible. Most management folks feel free to interrupt informal working sessions of subordinates, but need to realize that they may be interrupting a brainstorming session that will produce the company's next big success. Always apologize if you must interrupt a conversation, meeting or someone's concentration on a task. Quickly state the nature of what you need and show consideration for the fact that you are interrupting valuable work or thought process.

**... to be continued ?Radhika Warriar (NEE REGE)**

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