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# Good Manners Matter

Further than Figures

Good Manners Matter

Don't underestimate the importance of proper etiquette on the road to business success.

FROM: NOV-DEC 2005 ISSUE | BY MERGE GUPTA-SUNDERJI

Many Canadian organizations are spending money to teach their employees good manners and business etiquette. But wait...isn't that something you should have learned by now? The truth is that clients and co-workers make judgments about you based on what they see. Whether you are in the lunchroom or the boardroom, good manners and grooming can give you an enormous advantage.

Every summer, the national firm of Mercer Human Resources Consulting runs a training program of education and training for their up-and-coming leaders. This year, close to 400 bright-eyed stars of the future made their way to Niagara-on-the-Lake in southern Ontario for three days of learning and networking. An entire evening was devoted to manners and etiquette.

"It's all part of becoming a professional," says Karyn O'Neill, chief human resources officer for the company. "We are committed to supporting people as they develop their total professionalism." Her sentiment is echoed by others. Many professional services firms have developed formal programs to ensure employees develop these skills.

So what constitutes good manners, appropriate grooming, and polite etiquette? *The Handbook of Home Economics* published by the Hamilton Board of Education, circa 1949, has the following to say about good grooming: "One's hair should be well-brushed each day, and washed at least once in two weeks. Hair should be combed and neatly arranged before leaving home, as combing hair in public is not an attractive sight. Bathing is a necessity for both health and appearance. A daily bath, with a mild soap producing good lather is ideal; at least twice a week bathing is essential."

While some things have changed over the last half-century, the principles comprising good manners have remained the same.

Here's what *The Handbook of Home Economics* had to say about table manners:

- Always be prompt at meals.
- Wait until the hostess begins to taste before starting yourself.
- Always eat in a leisurely manner, being ready to pass food to others and enter into pleasant conversation.
- Butter only a small piece of bread or roll at a time.
- Cut only a small portion of food at a time.
- Chew with your mouth closed.
- Don't speak with food in your mouth.

- Keep the elbows close to the body while tasting.
- Dip the spoon away from you when tasting soup.
- Thank your hostess for a delightful time rather than for a delicious meal.

Not surprisingly, when I asked Lynne Waugh, one of the co-founders of The Etiquette Advantage, a company that offers such training programs, she told me that every single one of these rules still holds true today. And she offered me a couple of tips for use in today's business world.

"When attending a business function that involves food or drink, your objective is not to appear hungry or greedy," says Waugh. "If necessary, eat before you go. Your objective is to build relationships, and you won't be successful in that goal if you are perceived by others as hungry or greedy."

As the holiday season approaches and the rounds of business cocktail parties and networking events are about to begin, a quick refresher is in order. At a stand-up event, hold your drink in your left hand so that you always have your right hand available to shake hands. Only eat food that can easily be eaten in one bite without dripping or crumbling down your front.

Don't slurp your drink, nor use it to wash down the food in your mouth. Take small sips, not big gulps that make your cheeks balloon out. And on the subject of drinking, remember that you are at the event to build business relationships, not to have a boisterous good time. Even if the evening is blessed with an open bar, drinking too much can lead to career and business suicide. Save the heavy imbibing for a private event. And in the words of the infamous Seinfeld, when at the appetizer table, don't double-dip.

As for small talk, if your insides turn to jelly at the thought of making conversation with a stranger, then it may be some comfort to know that you are not alone. Most fearful souls rapidly scan the crowd as they walk into the room to see whom they already know. Then they zero in on those familiar people, and stick to them like glue. While it is the easy route to follow, in most cases, it defeats the purpose of attending.

A useful strategy is to actively look to join people you don't know. Ideally, seek out someone who is standing alone, because chances are that person is feeling the same way you are, and simply by making the effort, you'll build rapport.

Be sure to make eye contact, smile, and hold out your hand in a firm handshake, while introducing yourself. It also helps to make an opening statement. There are many options, but "What brings you here?" or "Quite the event, isn't it?" are often great starters. Keeping the conversation going is hard for many, and phrases such as "I see what you mean," and "What happened then?" are good choices. If you're really stuck, "Tell me more about that," is a wonderful way to keep a dialogue moving.

Finally, stay away from taboo topics. The old adages about religion and politics still apply, but to it, add another one. As Waugh says, "People aren't keen to witness the wonders of your body at work, and they don't want to hear about them either." So save those discussions for your next doctor's appointment, and give them a skip this time around.

Dress appropriately. Even if the event is business casual, remember that the first word is "business." Do yourself a favour and stay away from jeans in a business environment. Exercise the same restraint when it comes to sweat pants or T-shirts. And wear clothes that fit — anything too tight or too loose will convey an inappropriate impression.

Good manners matter. Leslie Hetherington, VP of professional development for the Toronto chapter of the International Association of Business Communicators, captured it best when she said, "Good manners and grooming are particularly important for that first impression and communicating a sustained professional

profile for yourself and your organization." Use this knowledge to your advantage, and give yourself a professional edge.

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**Merge Gupta-Sunderji, MBA, CGA**, helps turn managers into leaders through her training consultancy. Contact her at [www.mergespeaks.com](http://www.mergespeaks.com) or 403 605-4756.

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