



Socially Smart & Savvy

Top experts share their secrets for success

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Business *Smarts*

The Essential Social Graces to Know in Business—and Beyond

by Evelyn Lundström, AICI CIP

BEN, A FRESH-FACED banking hotshot, strode into the cafeteria, bursting through the swinging doors so fast they nearly bowled over his companion. He sat down eagerly and snapped his fingers to catch the server's attention.

“The usual!” he barked.

The server smiled tightly and took his order. Then, she waited patiently for Ben's now-embarrassed lunch companion to scan the menu and order too. Ben drummed his fingers on the tabletop wordlessly, scanning the room.

The meal soon arrived and Ben dug in, holding his fork like a shovel and not talking until he had finished and shoved his plate aside.

Ben was headed to the top of the finance world. He had learned the ropes fast and was likeable, well spoken and neatly dressed. However, he lacked social graces, and this was starting to be noticed by his clients, colleagues and manager. He charged into conference rooms or elevators ahead of others. He devoured his meals wordlessly, not looking up until he was finished. He faltered over personal introductions. His manager brought me in to “do something fast” about Ben's lack of etiquette.

That was how I found myself as Ben's companion in the above scenario, sitting opposite him and watching the top of his head as he ate.

Manners and Etiquette—What's the Difference?

Etiquette is an oddly old-fashioned term, conjuring up visions of white gloves and “hoity-toity” talk. Today's powerbrokers—including Ben's employers in the banking world—know that etiquette is more than mere show.

Good manners speak of personal charm and treating others with courtesy and respect. Etiquette speaks of real social knowledge—an understanding of the tools needed to convey these good manners.

Think about some modern-day masters of etiquette—whether it's Michelle Obama, your company's CEO or a veteran Saks Fifth Avenue® saleswoman—and you'll also realize that those with outstanding etiquette also wield considerable social power.

Someone with good etiquette doesn't just open the door for their companion or know how to charm a host at a party. These people are fully-fledged social professionals—people who send timely RSVPs and thank-you notes, mingle artfully at functions, wield cultured knowledge at a fine dining occasion and present with warmth and authority.

The first step in learning about etiquette is to establish rapport with yourself, others and the setting. The next step is to learn some graces for life's key social occasions—including meeting new people, attending social events and following up with someone.

The Three Rs of Rapport

Let's start with the basics of etiquette, which boil down to making others feel good. This, in turn, starts with establishing rapport with yourself, others and your surroundings. Here's how it works:

- **Rapport with yourself.** Think ahead to a social or business occasion and plan how you want to look, feel and present yourself. Be well rested, cool, comfortable, fed, watered, suitably attired and punctual on your arrival.
- **Rapport with others.** Understand what makes others feel good in a social situation. Whether at the workplace or beyond, learn to adjust to others' mannerisms or spoken tone by using similar nuances. Make sure to give a genuine handshake, introduce yourself with confidence and converse on comfortable topics. Give people courteous signals of what you are going to do. If you are running late, notify those who need to know.
- **Rapport with the setting.** Ensure the other person is comfortable with the surroundings. Offer refreshments, point out the facilities, clarify anything necessary about the schedule of events and establish some comfortable small talk before getting down to business.

Ben and I started with rapport building. It turned out that his lack of know-how was holding him back privately, too. He had been dating a special woman for three years and had approached her family twice with a marriage proposal. He had been rejected both times. Her family liked him, yet were worried their daughter would be subjected to a lifetime of social gaffes—such as Ben serving himself first at dinners, pouring cola into the champagne flutes, making abrupt departures or failing to introduce himself to new faces at family gatherings.

Top Nine Tips for Working Social Events

Once Ben understood that social esteem begins with making others feel good, it took only a few days to put this knowledge to good use. He started by mastering the following nine rules for impressing at social events, both in the workplace and beyond. Note that we have created a separate section to discuss rules of conversation—a huge topic on its own.

1. RSVPs. Reply to an invitation promptly—ideally, within one week of receiving the invitation, whether or not you will attend. Honor your commitments. Don't cancel one invitation because another, more compelling one has come up. You risk hurting the feelings of the person who first invited you, and etiquette is about making others feel good.

2. Setting a Compelling Outcome. Get more out of a social or business event by setting an outcome for yourself before you go. This could be to meet three new people or reconnect with a former mentor or colleague. Setting an agenda will help you subconsciously seek out opportunities to fulfill it.

Relax if you fall short of your goal. Enjoying yourself is another prerequisite of attending a social event, so give yourself a tick if you have achieved that instead of collecting a tenth business card.

3. Arriving. Make sure you arrive on time or no more than fifteen minutes late for casual, social occasions. On arriving, greet the host if you know him or her and introduce yourself if you don't. If you have read the first rule of rapport, you will be neither parched nor famished and won't dive onto the food and drinks. Accept a drink and a snack and proceed to mingle.

On the host's side, note whether any new arrivals seem alone and introduce them to other guests with whom they may have something in common. Make sure your guests know where to find food, drinks and amenities.

4. Quality Introductions and Handshakes. Few impressions will stay with people as long as the first one, so make sure to get your introductions right. When meeting someone for the first time, introduce yourself in full, using your family name and company name—or your relationship to the host if it's a private function.

Introduce any companions in the same manner. Shake hands firmly, front-on, while making sure to stand up straight, smile and look the other person in the eye.

Make sure to address the most important person in the gathering first. For example, say to your employer, “Mrs. Jones, these are my friends John Smith and Jane Kwok” and then, “John and Jane, this is my boss, Mrs. Jones”—not the other way around. After introducing yourself and anyone with you, tell the person what you have been discussing and engage them in that discussion. Alternatively, ask them about themselves and what they do.

5. Approaching Others. Sometimes the person you want to speak with is with other people all night, and it’s hard to get close. Try to join them when there’s at least one other person in the group you know. Walk close to the group—someone will notice you. Make eye contact with the person and say something to acknowledge your intrusion, for example, “Hi. I’m Evelyn, and I haven’t seen Bob for so long, I just wanted to catch up with him.”

Sometimes, you may be lucky enough to find yourself momentarily alone with the person you’ve been seeking out—near the refreshments, for example, or moving between areas. Introduce yourself and strike up a conversation. If you’re at a loss about what to say, ask them about themselves.

People at the top love talking about how they got there. Try saying something like, “I’ve been tracking your career—what would you recommend for someone in my position?” Make sure to follow up the conversation with an appropriate thank you (see below).

6. Being There. One of the most annoying guests at any social function is one who is there—and not present. You know this person—the one

scanning the room while pretending to listen to a conversation or clearly bored with the proceedings.

Avoid becoming this person yourself by setting an outcome for the event. If you cannot find an outcome, don't go. Alternatively, embrace those moments where you find yourself alone. It is much better form to admire the art or the view alone for ten minutes than pretend to be interested in someone when it is obvious you are not.

7. Handling Alcoholic Beverages. If you drink at social functions, drink in moderation. If you cannot mingle without something in your hand, make sure you drink a glass of water after every glass of wine. Simply place a hand over your glass to decline a top-up.

At standing functions, keep your right hand free to shake hands by holding your glass, napkin and canapé in your left hand. You can do this by mastering the technique of threading a napkin between your middle finger and ring finger, so part of the napkin covers the palm of your left hand. Then clamp your wine glass between your forefinger and thumb and rest a canapé on your napkin-covered palm.

8. Leaving. Sometime after the end of the formalities, it is appropriate to leave. If you must be the first out the door, make sure to excuse yourself to your host appropriately. On the other hand, don't overstay your welcome and be the last out the door, either.

Once the evening starts to wear and the formalities are over, shake hands with those around you and say goodbye. Keep your goodbyes short and say you will be in touch if there is someone you still want to speak with. Seek out the hosts and thank them for the invitation, being sure to include a brief and sincere compliment on the occasion. Then leave. Don't get distracted by others as you leave and find yourself face-to-face with someone you said goodbye to an hour earlier, which will have them thinking you wanted to escape them.

9. And Afterwards... It sounds old-fashioned—a handwritten note or card is still the most gracious and elegant way to thank hosts for their efforts. Even if they spoke to you for barely five minutes during the occasion, they will appreciate and remember you clearly with this gesture. Email thank you notes are simply not the same.

Top Three Tips for Office Etiquette

The basic rules for conduct at the office are not much different from those above, regarding conduct at a social occasion. However, for the record, here are some additional things to keep in mind.

1. Quality Handshakes and Introductions. As explained above, you should never underestimate the importance of introductions. Always introduce yourself and others in full and address the important people first. Pay attention to your handshake—it should be firm, friendly, last for two or three shakes and be accompanied with a smile and firm gaze. Get someone to review your handshake if you are not sure of the impression it is leaving, whether too weak or too strong.

2. Conduct at Meetings. The key to a successful meeting is to be prepared—just like for any social occasion. Before the meeting, read the agenda, do your research and give others enough time to prepare key materials. At the meeting, arrive on time, take notes and present the ideas you have prepared earlier. After the meeting, follow up by sending notes, web links or ideas to colleagues and acknowledge any contributions made.

3. Mixing with Others. The workplace is not just about boardrooms and workstations. You will cross colleagues and bosses in the kitchens, hallways, elevators and the taxi stand out front, so keep in mind the principles of making others feel good by letting people go first, respecting their personal space and keeping interactions professional and appropriate.

The Smart Conversationalist

As with all etiquette, artful conversation boils down to making the other person feel good.

Stand at arm's length to respect the other person's personal space while still being able to hear and be heard. Match their tone of voice and seek out topics of mutual interest. If you notice someone trying to join your group at a function, introduce yourself and engage them in your discussion or simply ask about them and what they do.

Next, make sure the conversation keeps everyone feeling good by sticking with neutral topics like sports and the arts, current affairs, company policy, client needs, ideas supportive of the company or occasions and upcoming events. Avoid controversial areas such as religion, politics, your (or others') personal lives, gossip, management gripes and divisive issues.

Be aware of your style of conversation. Are you naturally chatty? Ask someone to tell you if you're so chatty that others don't get a word in. On the other hand, are you naturally reticent? If you are often stuck for words, try repeating the last point made by the person and then adding to it, rather than responding with mostly "ums" and "ahs."

Finally, learn to make the right closing when you feel it is time to move on. Instead of making a vague escape like "Anyway, I really need some food now," or "There's my friend Rob," acknowledge the conversation simply and without making excuses. For example, "Well, that's been really interesting, and I will certainly look up that website on marlin fishing. I hope we can catch up again." See also "Social Mixology 101" by Rachel Estelle on page 73.

The Model Student

Mastering the basics of etiquette does not take long, as our determined young banker, Ben, discovered. Within a week of etiquette training, Ben was subjected to a critical test—taking his boss, Michael, out to dinner and dealing with a number of unscripted glitches.

For example, finding himself running five minutes late, Ben thought for a moment before calling the restaurant. He introduced himself and then said, “I’m taking my boss to dinner tonight, and he is about to arrive. Please seat him at the bar, take his drink order and put it on my account.”

During the evening, Ben was a model of courtesy, inviting Michael to select the wines, serving himself last from the breadbasket, standing up when a female companion left the table and conversing with ease between unhurried mouthfuls.

At the evening’s end, Michael signaled for the staff to bring the check.

“Thank you, sir, but your companion here has already organized it,” came the server’s smiling response.

Ben had discreetly paid for the whole dinner ten minutes earlier.

Ben not only got his promotion and the recognition that came with it, he also got the girl several months later. His change in behavior so impressed his future parents-in-law that they wholeheartedly endorsed his proposal of marriage to their daughter.

What’s Next?

Successful business people are a little like great athletes—the more varied their training, the better the results. Business professionals will project their success most effectively when they are cultured, well-spoken, stylish, fit, charming and etiquette savvy.

There are many steps—big and small—that you can take to improve your know-how of business etiquette, beginning with mastering the basics outlined here.

As with any kind of change, you will get the best results if you don't attempt to do it solo. Partner up with a learning buddy who wants to make the same changes, or get someone you trust to rank you from one to ten in the various areas described in this chapter. You will be surprised at how quickly a little etiquette training can boost your business and social skillsets.



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EVELYN LUNDSTRÖM is one of Australia's most experienced image and personal branding consultants with her company, First Impressions Image Training and Consulting. A certified image professional with the Association of Image Consultants Inter-national® and a master practitioner of NLP and timeline therapy, Evelyn develops and delivers training programs for industries as diverse as financial services, professional services, travel, hospitality and academia. She advises corporate groups and individuals on image management strategies for greater recognition and personal success.

A trusted advisor and coach, Evelyn delights in helping individuals improve their personal image, grooming and presentation style to achieve their highest goals.

Recognized as a preferred trainer of image professionals entering the industry, Evelyn has developed the *Definitive Colour Profiling System* for image and color professionals internationally. She is the co-author of *Executive Style* published by Prentice Hall in 1980 and is currently writing the definitive book on *How Not To Do Old*.