

Etiquette Tips for Meeting Success

When hosting a business meal or function, certain codes of etiquette in the planning and execution of the event are important to remember.

Scheduling meetings over food is common practice, whether it means taking a single client out for a meal or hosting a large business luncheon. There are certain guidelines and codes of etiquette both you as the planner and your clients should follow before and during a business function to ensure its smooth execution.

GO WITH THE FAMILIAR. Forget about a new restaurant you've just heard about and go with what you know. You'll want to choose a place where your client is familiar with the food and will feel the most comfortable. If the host is comfortable, the guests will feel at ease as well. Find out ahead of time who the invitees are, their professional titles, and if anyone is kosher, vegetarian, or has any other dietary restrictions, to avoid the embarrassment of guests being unable to enjoy the meal....

PLAN SEATING AHEAD. If it's a small business meal, the guest of honor should always sit to the right of the host. For a large luncheon or event, find out if any married couples do not share the same last name, so you can make sure you don't accidentally separate them. Also, knowing about and taking into account any office politics beforehand can avoid an uncomfortable situation on the day of the event.

RECONFIRM MEETING WITH GUESTS. At least one week of advance notice is appropriate for all business meals, and sometimes even two, if you know the guest of honor is very busy. For small meetings, it's a good idea to have your client call guests the day before or the day of the event, to confirm the appointment and further express his or her interest in seeing them. Phone calls are a better way to communicate than email, as they are more personal and some people don't always check their email frequently, even in these days of Treos and BlackBerries.

THE HOST SHOULD WELCOME GUESTS. Though it hasn't always been required in the past, officially welcoming the guests will alert the group that

everyone has arrived and once again expresses the host's gratitude for the guests' attendance. However, brevity is key....

BUSINESS FIRST? Just because it's a business meal doesn't mean that work has to be the main topic of conversation the second you sit down. In fact, it is customary to wait until after dinner, but before dessert, to bring up professional matters. An exception can be made if the host or guests are pressed for time.... In the case of larger business functions, feeding guests first is a great strategy to avoid impatience or daydreaming during important discussions. In either large groups or one-on-ones, while socializing with guests avoid discussing illness, allergies, or anything else that will make them feel uncomfortable.

FOOD AND ALCOHOL PROTOCOL.

Many people forget that a business meal is just that—a meal. When ordering food, remind your host that the emphasis is on business, and therefore the food should be simple. Avoid any foods that are messy or difficult to eat. Sandwiches and finger foods fall into this category. At a more formal meeting, if the food is to be served at a scheduled time, make sure to stick to the schedule. Otherwise, the food may get cold or soggy if the business or presentation part of your event runs longer than expected. It is not appropriate to drink in excess at a business function, so tell your client to follow their guests' lead when ordering drinks. If the guests order alcohol but your host doesn't drink, he or she should simply order something nonalcoholic—guests may feel uncomfortable drinking if the host has nothing to sip at all. As a general rule, unless it is a wine tasting, stick to the one-drink rule during business meals.

GOOD MANNERS ARE ESSENTIAL.

According to **Elena Brouwer**, founder and director of the **International Etiquette Centre**, napkins should be placed on the lap upon seating, and bread should be torn off and buttered in small pieces. When the meal is finished, it is customary to place the slightly folded napkin on the table, with the silverware together on the plate, facing 10 o'clock.

"Business meals are very important, because you get to know the person on a different level. You see their manners, and sometimes you decide at that point whether you do want to do business with that person or not, just because of how they behave at the table," says **Brouwer**.

COMFORT IS THE KEY.

No matter if you have one attendee or 200, proper etiquette states that it's essential to ensure the clients or associates feel at ease.... This rule applies to



conversation, food, manners, and money. For instance, if the host's meal arrives before their guests', the host should wait to begin eating until the guests' meals arrive. Alternately, if guests' meals arrive first, it is polite to encourage them to begin.

HANDLE INTERRUPTIONS AND ACCIDENTS WITH GRACE.

The unexpected will almost definitely occur at one point or another, and dealing with it appropriately can make or break your event. Rather than getting upset, the host should handle the situation as efficiently as possible. Depending on the circumstances, it may be appropriate to deal with it using humor, an apology, help from the server, or reimbursement if necessary. If an uninvited guest stops by the table, keep the conversations to a minimum. It is always inappropriate to allow uninvited guests to stay for an excessive amount of time or to sit down to eat with the host and guests. If the person is a friend of the host, the host should introduce him or her and end the conversation as soon as possible. Under no circumstances should hosts answer their cell phones if they ring at the table. In fact, all cell phones should be turned off or put on silent before the meal begins.

PAY THE BILL AHEAD.

Guests should never be expected or feel obligated to pay, even for the tip. Having the bill squared away early will avoid any uncomfortable situations as you figure the tip or awkward silence as the guests wait for you.

SEND THANK-YOU NOTES THE NEXT DAY.

Sending thank-you notes as a follow-up shows that the host is eager to begin a new business relationship with the recipient or appreciates the clients' current business. "When someone whom you've treated to a business meal receives a thank-you note in the mail, it makes all the difference," says **Brouwer**. Also, a handwritten note carries more weight than an email, as it shows that the writer put in some extra time and effort. — *Ashley Guistolisi*

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