

Professional Etiquette Still Matters

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“Back in the day” most children were taught to say “please” and “thank you.” They were also taught to ask permission before taking or doing something, open doors and pull out chairs at the dinner table for ladies, assist elderly people, wear suits to religious functions and to dinner with a date, send a thank you note following a dinner or stay at a friends house, and to generally conduct themselves in a more civil manner according to customs and values of a bygone era. Much of that behavior typically carried over into the workplace.

Things have changed a bit over the years. Many children do not have common civilities drilled into them when they are young. They address older people and customers by their first name without permission, ignore titles of address (e.g. Doctor, Mr. or Ms.) and think nothing of taking the last item on a plate at a dinner or social function without first offering it a co-worker or other person present.

The result of the manners and etiquette deficiency is an individual who violates established rules of behavior for society while behaving in an unacceptable way with customers, co-workers and anyone with whom they come into contact on a daily basis.

The following are some tips on more appropriate behavior and etiquette that may be useful in a variety of settings.

Introductions and Greeting

- Address people, especially those senior or older and customers, by their title and last name unless they give permission to use their first name.
- When introducing people in a social or business setting, present the junior to the senior and mention the senior person’s name first. For example if you were introducing a new employee to your CEO during an orientation meeting, you would say, “Ms. Renaldi, may I present our new order processing manager, Susan Hathaway.” At a company picnic where you are introducing your spouse or significant other to your boss, you would mention the bosses name first (not because the boss is more important, but because it is a company function). Such an introduction would be, “Mr. Frank Thompson, may I present Mary Joy Lucas, my wife...”. Note that “my wife” comes after the name of the spouse, since as a person, she is more important than her position as a wife.
- When introducing two people of equal status you may use age as the determining factor (the oldest introduced first), or you can use gender (females introduced first).

- When introducing a very senior person to a group of people say the name of the senior person and invite each person in the group to individually introduce him- or herself to avoid errors in their names.

Capitalizing on Vocal Nuances

Because of the informal tone of so many activities and events in today's business environment, many people have gotten lazy in their appearance, personal presentation and language. When communicating in a business environment, remember that first impressions are important and lasting. Correct grammar and enunciation of words can send a powerful message about your attitude, education, and abilities. Do not start off or negatively impact a relationship by using overly familiar phrases or language on the telephone, in writing, or face-to-face, that may come back to haunt you later. Examples of poor practices include the following (or variations of them).

- "Hi"
- "How ya doin'?"
- "What's up?"
- "Right on"
- "I hear that"
- "See ya"
- "Bye-Bye"
- "Uh huh"
- "Yep"
- "Naw"
- "That's what I'm talking 'bout"

When calling someone on the telephone or when greeting talking with them, use language and delivery that is going to make and leave a positive impression on your message recipient. Be enthusiastic, friendly, and professional at all times. You never know who is listening.

Presenting a Polished Image

Your voice is not the only thing that projects your image. Your physical appearance says much about your attitude, self-image, values, beliefs, and ability to handle various situations. Each generation has its own beliefs related to appearance. Hair, make-up, clothing, jewelry, accessories, and other personal aspects evolve regularly from generation to generation. Whenever you get two people from different generations together, they are likely to disagree on what is appropriate. One thing is for certain regarding appearance – if you go into a given workplace, each has its own culture and rules of behavior. Violate them and your boss, co-workers and customers will have a very specific and sometimes negative reaction to you.

To be successful in your workplace, follow the policies and the age-old guidance of “when in doubt, follow your supervisor’s lead.” They should know the rules and have the experience to know what is appropriate and not. When in doubt, ask them.

The bottom line related to appearance is that depending on your job, you should maintain a level of appropriate professionalism. Cleanliness, personal hygiene and grooming are keys to success in virtually any environment. Dress in a manner that you do not offend anyone with whom you come into contact and strive to leave a positive impression. Clothing, make-up, jewelry and other accessories that may be appropriate for going to the club or partying the night before likely do not belong in a workplace setting. Learn to separate the two environments and act accordingly.

E-mail Etiquette

E-mail has been around long enough to have its own set of rules. Unfortunately, many people still violate those rules and end up in embarrassing situations or looking unprofessional. Remember that there is no such thing as total deletion of a message with technology. Also, keep in mind that once you hit the send button, your message is out there for the world to see and you will never know exactly who reads what you wrote. For that reason, act professionally and prudently at all times.

When you send something from your email address, that address often gets forwarded along with your message to many other people. If there is something obscene, discriminatory, offensive or otherwise unprofessional in the text, YOU are forever associated with it. As a result, people may draw conclusions about you, your beliefs, opinions, and views from the message. If you use your organization email address, which many organizations now monitor and hold employees accountable for, you could also tarnish your company’s reputation by something that you write.

To better use e-mail technology to your advantage, consider the following points:

- Do not use over familiarity, especially when writing a customer, senior person, or someone with whom you only have a business relationship;
- Use appropriate salutations such as, “Hello,” “Good afternoon,” and so on, along with the recipient’s title and last name (if known);
- If possible, keep attachments to a minimum and small since they can slow down receipt of a message and tie up someone’s mail system;
- Do not send unprofessional or unsolicited material (e.g. jokes, racy photos, obscene material, chain mail, or advertisements);
- Avoid emoticons (especially the animated types). These are the little characters drawn with various letters and punctuation key strokes (e.g. smile face characters);
- Respond promptly;
- Avoid all capital letters since that is often perceived as non-verbal shouting and can potentially offend someone;

- Rather than continuing an ongoing back-and-forth dialogue on a topic via e-mail, pick up the telephone or go to meet with the person. This can often more quickly resolve the issue and can save a lot of wasted time or confusion;
- Recognize that people can often misinterpret word meaning based on their perceptions. A breakdown in communication and relationships can sometimes result without your ever fully understanding what happened;
- Be cautious of using Blind Courtesy Copies (BCC). This function allows you to send a copy to someone without the original recipient's knowledge. The question might surface as to why you hid the fact that so and so got a copy without the original recipient being notified? The suspicion could be that you are trying to hide something or go behind someone's back on an issue. Since relationships are built on trust, why risk a breakdown over something as simple as a BCC?
- Don't make assumptions if you do not receive a response. It is often a good idea to follow up on email involving meeting times, dates and projects to make sure that everyone involved has the same understanding. Many meetings are missed or people come unprepared for them everyday because someone "assumed;"
- Never respond to a message if you are angry or upset over the sender or something that he or she said in an e-mail. You may long regret doing so.

Certainly, the rules of etiquette have changed over the years. The question is have you changed with them? Stay current and stay connected in order to maintain a professional presence.

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