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## SEALING THE DEAL OVER THE BUSINESS MEAL

Doing business over meals is a ritual that has existed for centuries. Taking clients to breakfast, lunch or dinner has long been an effective way to build relationships, make the sale or seal the deal. These business meals are essentially business meetings. Knowledge of your product or your service is crucial to the success of the meeting, but so are your manners. Too many people jeopardize an opportunity because they fail to use good dining etiquette. Here are a few basic rules to make the experience pleasurable and profitable.

Know your duties as the host. You are in charge. It is up to you to see that things go well and that your guests are comfortable. You need to attend to every detail from extending the invitation to paying the bill.

Plan ahead when you issue the invitation. Allow a week for a business dinner and three days for lunch. Be certain that the date works for you. That might sound obvious, but if you have to cancel or postpone, you can look disorganized and disrespectful of your clients' time.

Select a restaurant that you know, preferably one where you are known. This is no time to try out the latest hot spot. Being confident of the quality of the food and service leaves you free to focus on business.

Consider the atmosphere. Does it lend itself to conversation and discussion? If you and your clients can't hear each other over the roar of the diners and dishes, you will have wasted your time and money.

When you make your reservation, let the staff know that you will be dining with clients. If your guests suggest a restaurant new to you (perhaps you are hosting clients out-of-town), call ahead and speak with the maitre'd. Make it clear that you will be having an important business meal and picking up the check.

Confirm the meal appointment with your clients the day before if you are meeting for breakfast or that day if you are having lunch or dinner. Things do happen and mix-ups occur.

Arrive early so you can attend to last minute details. This is the perfect time to give your credit card to the maitre'd and avoid the awkwardness that seems to accompany the arrival of the bill.

Take charge of the seating. Your guests should have the prime seats-the ones with the view. As the host, take the least desirable spot-the one facing the wall, the kitchen or the restrooms.

Beyond being polite, where you seat your guests is strategic. When you are entertaining one client, sit next to each at a right angle rather than across the table. With two clients, put one across from you and the other to your side. If you sit between them, you will look as if you are watching a match at Wimbledon as you try to follow the conversation.

Allow your guests to order first. You might suggest certain dishes to be helpful. By recommending specific items, you are indicating a price range. Order as many courses as your guests, no more and no less, to facilitate the flow of the meal. It is awkward if one of you orders an appetizer or dessert and the others do not.

As the host, you are the one who decides when to start discussing business. That will depend on a number of factors such as the time of day and how well you know your clients. At breakfast, time is short so get down to business quickly. At lunch, wait until you have ordered so you won't be interrupted. Dinner, the more social occasion, is a time for rapport building. Limit the business talk and do it after the main course is completed.

When you know your clients well, you have more of a basis for small talk. However, because you have established a business friendship, you can eliminate some of the chitchat when time is an issue. When you don't know your clients well, spend more time getting acquainted before launching your shoptalk.

Sometimes you simply need to use your own judgment about when to get down to business, realizing that if you wait too long, your clients may start to wonder why they were invited. If you begin too early in the meal, your guests might suspect that you are more interested in their money than you are in them.

Keep an eye on the time, but don't let your guests see you checking your watch. Breakfast should typically last an hour; lunch an hour and a half. Wrap up your business dinner in two to three hours, no more.

Handle any disasters with grace. With all your attention to detail, things can still go wrong. The food may not be up to your standards, the waiter might be rude or the people at the next table boisterous and out of control. Whatever happens, make sure you are not the one to lose control. Excuse yourself to discuss any problems with the staff. Your guests will feel uncomfortable if you complain in front of or to them.

Limit the amount of alcohol you drink at the business meal. The three Martini lunch is mostly a thing of the past. However, cocktails and wine are still part of the business dinner. Since alcohol can have the same effect as truth serum, keep your consumption to one or two glasses. When guests are drinking liberally and you sense trouble, excuse yourself and discreetly ask the server to hold back on refilling the wine glasses or offering another cocktail.

Your conduct over the meal will determine your professional success. If you pay attention to the details and make every effort to see that your clients have a pleasant experience, they will assume that you will handle their business the same way. Before long you could have them eating out of your hand.