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Sharpen Your Tools

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The Power of Etiquette

Building relationships is key to differentiating your business

Etiquette plays a role in all we do, from servicing our customers, to the way we dress, send a text or email, or dine at a restaurant. But it is the little things done on a regular and consistent basis that will separate you from your competition and give you that special edge.

It takes only seconds to make that separation from being good to being the very best.

True Connections

There are many ways of connecting and building relationships. Consider it a pyramid, with each block supporting the other. Start with a strong foundation, then prepare each level of growth strategically. Put your plan into action and grow collectively with everyone on your team.

Everything—from your appearance, attitude, handshakes and introductions, to your technology skills, business and dining skills—creates split-second first impressions.

Technology connects people. We can now access hundreds of active sites for social networking. Social networking between businesses is a quick, inexpensive and productive way to promote your brand and image around the world. YouTube, Facebook and LinkedIn are just a few ways to expand your base of customers, increase your exposure, and share ideas in a matter of seconds. Use it, but don't forget to connect on a personal basis.

Remember, these technology marvels shouldn't allow us to insult or be disrespectful to the person next to us. We need not allow social media to replace personal communication. Remember to meet, greet, smile, have eye-to-eye contact, shake hands and talk to one another. Set expectations for your staff and even your customers on the standards of electrical devices in a restaurant. Make the meal and the people the center of attention, not the person on the phone at the next table.

Don't just talk about business. Events are networking opportunities. You can approach someone to set up a future meeting and exchange business cards, but leave the brochures and proposals at the office. Read the newspaper, watch the news and be familiar with the latest in the restaurant industry. Always be prepared and knowledgeable.

Know how to start a conversation. Make it easy by talking about the weather, current events or topics that are appropriate to the event or situation. Avoid politics, personal questions and religion. Most people love to talk about themselves, their jobs and families. So engage them in that conversation. If you are in doubt, follow the 20/80 rule in communication: talk 20 percent of the time and listen 80 percent of the time.

It is amazing to realize that you will receive help if you ask for it. Try these openers:

"This is my first time to RFMA; do you have any tips to share?"

"I have been waiting all year for the RFMA Annual Conference; can you give me any suggestions that would help me over the next few days?"

"I am so excited about attending this meeting. I noticed you have been talking to so many people and was hoping you could introduce me to some of them."

Make a concerted effort to network. Where do you go first when you enter a reception or event? Most people will walk to the bar first, the buffet or food area second, and their friends third. All three are great ideas, but wrong.

Walk in and go meet someone new. Always try to greet your host or hostess at the beginning of the event. Don't stay long with them; just thank them, exchange a few comments and move on. They have a lot of people to meet and greet. Remember that this is a reception and not a time to present brochures. Just bring your business cards and a great smile.

Know the audience and the people or companies you want and need to meet. Call or email them in advance to set up a meeting during free time at a conference. If there is a free evening, offer to take them to dinner, but start small. A new client or acquaintance is more likely to give you 10-15 minutes instead of hours of their time. Immediately follow up with material or proposals from the discussion and meeting.

You can also set up an introduction through a third party. This takes preparation, so allow enough time. When the meeting is arranged, be extremely professional and have your business card ready. Follow up immediately with a handwritten note to that person, expressing your pleasure in meeting them and for the opportunity to work with them in the future. Thank your third-party host also.

Introductions are important, and remember "HOW." The rule of thumb is to introduce the person with less authority/ rank to the person of Higher rank. Say the higher-ranking person's name first in the introduction. When rank is not involved, introduce the Older person to the younger, and introduce the Woman first. There are exceptions, but this is a good starting point. If you are introducing two new people, use their names in the introduction and include a brief explanation about both. It helps start their conversation and allows you to exit.

If your plans change, you need to advise the host. If you don't respond, you cost the planner unnecessary dollars and planning time. Remember that only the person or people listed on the invitation are invited. Do not feel free to bring others if they do not appear on the invitation.

If a friend or associate has invited you to their home for a party, bring a gift, but not flowers. Flowers may not match their décor, and they will need to stop to find a place to arrange them. If you bring wine, remember that it is not yours to open that evening and drink. It was a gift for them to enjoy after the event. Make the gift enjoyable for them, and fit their style, not yours. The host will appreciate your thoughtfulness, too, if you thank them personally at the end of the party or event and send a personal, handwritten note or flowers the next day.

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