

Business Etiquette: 5 Rules That Matter Now

By Eliza Browning

The word may sound stodgy. But courtesy and manners are still essential – particularly in business.

The ‘elevator rule’: Don’t discuss the meeting till you’re out of the elevator ... and the building.

The word “etiquette” gets a bad rap. For one thing, it sounds stodgy and pretentious. And rules that are socially or morally prescribed seem intrusive to our sense of individuality and freedom.

But the concept of etiquette is still essential, especially now—and particularly in business. New communication platforms, like Facebook and Linked In, have blurred the lines of appropriateness and we’re all left wondering how to navigate uncharted social territory.

At Crane & Co., we have been advising people on etiquette for two centuries. We have even published books on the subject—covering social occasions, wedding etiquette and more.

Boil it down and etiquette is really all about making people feel good. It’s not about rules or telling people what to do, or not to do, it’s about ensuring some basic social comforts.

So here are a few business etiquette rules that matter now – whatever you want to call them.

Send a Thank You Note

I work at a paper company that manufactures stationery and I’m shocked at how infrequently people send thank you notes after interviewing with me. If you’re not sending a follow-up thank you note to Crane, you’re not sending it anywhere.

But the art of the thank you note should never die. If you have a job interview, or if you’re visiting clients or meeting new business partners – especially if you want the job, or the contract or deal – take the time to write a note. You’ll differentiate yourself by doing so and it will reflect well on your company too.

Know the Names

It’s just as important to know your peers or employees as it is to develop relationships with clients, vendors or management. Reach out to people in your company, regardless of their roles, and acknowledge what they do.

My great-grandfather ran a large manufacturing plant. He would take his daughter (my grandmother) through the plant; she recalled that he knew everyone’s name – his deputy, his workers, and the man who took out the trash.

We spend too much of our time these days looking up – impressing senior management. But it’s worth stepping back and acknowledging and getting to know all of the integral people who work hard to make your business run.

Observe the ‘Elevator Rule’

When meeting with clients or potential business partners off-site, don’t discuss your impressions of the meeting with your colleagues until the elevator has reached the bottom floor and you’re walking out of the building. That’s true even if you’re the only ones in the elevator.

Call it superstitious or call it polite—but either way, don’t risk damaging your reputation by rehashing the conversation as soon as you walk away.

Focus on the Face, Not the Screen

It’s hard not to be distracted these days. We have a plethora of devices to keep us occupied; emails and phone calls come through at all hours; and we all think we have to multitask to feel efficient and productive.

But that’s not true: When you’re in a meeting or listening to someone speak, turn off the phone. Don’t check your email. Pay attention and be present.

When I worked in news, everyone was attached to a BlackBerry, constantly checking the influx of alerts. But my executive producer rarely used hers – and for this reason, she stood out. She was present and was never distracted in editorial meetings or discussions with the staff. And it didn’t make her any less of a success.

Don’t Judge

We all have our vices – and we all have room for improvement. One of the most important parts of modern-day etiquette is not to criticize others.

You may disagree with how another person handles a specific situation, but rise above and recognize that everyone is trying their best. It’s not your duty to judge others based on what you feel is right. You are only responsible for yourself.

We live in a world where both people and businesses are concerned about brand awareness. Individuals want to stand out and be liked and accepted by their peers – both socially and professionally.

The digital landscape has made it even more difficult to know whether or not you’re crossing a line, but I think it’s simple. Etiquette is positive. It’s a way of being – not a set of rules or dos and don’ts.

So before you create that hashtag, post on someone’s Facebook page or text someone mid-meeting, remember the fundamentals: Will this make someone feel good?

And remember the elemental act of putting pen to paper and writing a note. You’ll make a lasting impression that a shout-out on Twitter or a Facebook wall mention can’t even touch.

* <http://www.inc.com/eliza-browning/business-etiquette-rules-that-matter-now.html>