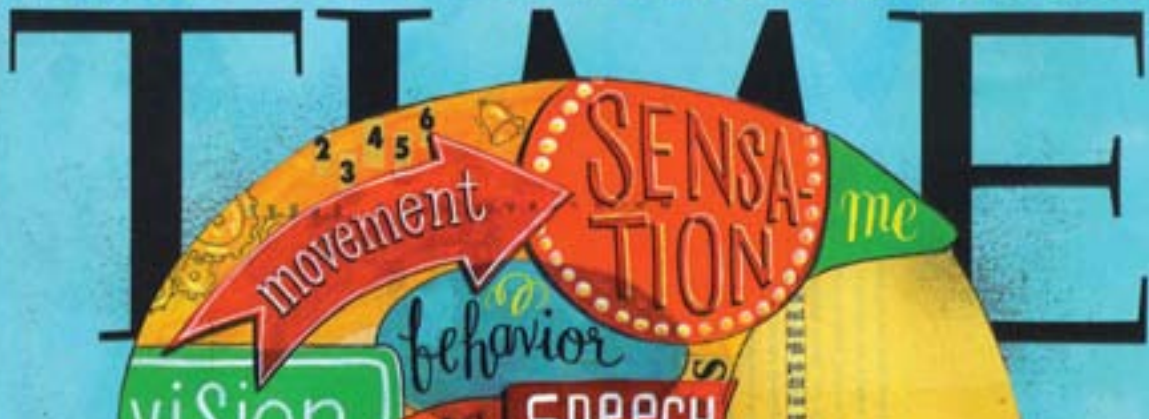


# MIND & BODY SPECIAL ISSUE



## GLOBAL BUSINESS

### MANNERS MATTER

Business-etiquette gurus are thriving. There's a difference between the informal and the uncivil



By ANDREA SACHS

**W**HEN I'M IN A RESTAURANT, I don't know what to do," confides Glorian Persaud, 20, a pharmacy student, with a defeated tone in her voice. "There are a million spoons." I know what she means. Who hasn't confronted a bewildering array of silverware and goblets at a fancy eatery or corporate function? And let's not even talk about eating in Europe. Well, that will be remedied soon enough. I am embarking on a journey

through the world of business etiquette, a journalistic Eliza Doolittle looking for a little polishing. As a result, I have awakened at the crack of dawn to join Persaud and her fellow pharmacy students at Rutgers University for a lecture by Barbara Pachter, a leading Biz Et expert who has written eight books on the subject, including her most recent, *New Rules @ Work*.

These are boom times in the Biz Et industry. Although businesses have become increasingly informal in dress and attitude over the past two decades, thanks in part to Silicon Valley, the greater corpo-

rate world hasn't completely lost its desire for a bit of decorum and savoir faire. In fact, it insists on it, one reason that some law and financial firms have reverted to suits and ties for men. Etiquette isn't easy for the generation that wears flip-flops on Fridays or closes billion-dollar deals in Denny's, as YouTube and Google famously did. So business schools and corporations are hiring Biz Et experts like Pachter to groom their charges in matters ranging from fork selection to the proper way to address the CEO.

Like others in the etiquette game, Peter Post, a director of the Emily Post Institute, reports a big uptick in his business. "We've been growing by leaps and bounds in the last couple of years," says Post, who gave 32 seminars in 2006, twice as many as the year before. The price for such one-day in-house corporate seminars ranges from \$2,500 to \$8,000. "There is a real desire on businesses' part to remedy a problem that they're seeing in their workforce. They have people coming in, or who are already in the workforce, who may have the job skills but who are embarrassing these companies when they're with clients."

Now pay attention, class. Pachter, whose clients include Microsoft, DaimlerChrysler and Merck, strides in with her tailored black pantsuit, black purse and black heels, looking serious. Are people suddenly ruder? she asks. The need for etiquette tune-ups has become direr as a result of changes in the business world, Pachter tells her students--more women,

more international commerce and new technologies like cell phones, BlackBerrys and e-mail.

Pachter briefs us on one of the burning issues in Biz Et: Is it appropriate to say thank you with an e-mail? "I've lessened my stance on it, as long as it's not for a gift," she announces. "We've become such an immediate society. When you send a thank-you note, it could take three, four, five days to get there. People start thinking, Isn't this person going to acknowledge it?" I lean forward as Pachter talks about what to eat at a business meal in a restaurant. "Order what's easy to eat," she advises. Forget about such splatter-prone fare as spaghetti, lobster or ribs unless you're in a specialty restaurant and your dining partners will be ordering the same. Other rules, according to the experts: Wait until everyone has been served before you start. And whatever you do, don't chew with your mouth open. Deal breaker.

Careful eating is required because you are properly dressed for the occasion. Pachter shows me photographs the class members have submitted of themselves in casual and business garb. The second set of pictures looks like a catalog of ill-fitting suits and hopeful smiles. In order to appear more professional, many of the women have tied back their hair while the men have toned down wild coifs. It's kind of sad, in a way, to see them begin their way along the corporate conveyor belt. Pachter expresses fondness for teaching college students: "They think this is great. They're looking for jobs, and they're beginning to believe that this matters."

A week later, I'm sitting in the audience at the plush Penn Club in midtown Manhattan, waiting to hear Post, the great-grandson of Emily, the etiquette pioneer. Post is turned out in corporate splendor--a sharp, dark gray suit. His tone is impassioned, as urgent as a preacher's. His message: Etiquette builds better relationships. Boiled down, he says, Biz Et has three aims: "Think before acting, make choices that build relationships, and do it sincerely." The well-tailored young business crowd pays rapt attention. They are the Rutgers pharmacy students fast-forwarded five or 10 years.

Now we get down to brass tacks--e-mail etiquette, a constant Biz Et pet peeve. "E-mails are public communications," cautions Post. "Murphy's Law is going to get you every time. E-mails get out." Ergo, don't send private messages. Don't

flame a recipient; let your grievances simmer. Be careful about your grammar and word choice. Always proofread your messages carefully. Avoid digital slang like *bcz*; emoticons like :- ) are :/ ). If you're not sure how formal to be, use an honorific like Mr. or Ms. until told to do otherwise.

Then Post, who has advised such companies as Verizon and Pfizer, wades into the fray around the hottest digital issue. He comes down on the side of paper thank-you notes. Rely on snail mail? Fine, send an e-mail and a card, he counsels. That strikes me as being as impractical as writing with a quill. Another sensitive subject: men helping women in business situations. Should a man hold a woman's chair at the table? The car door? Is it too chivalrous, too sexist? The best policy for men, says Post, is to ask the woman what she prefers: "May I help you on with your coat?"

There are literally hundreds of rules for corporate behavior in his hefty tome *The Etiquette Advantage in Business*, which he holds up. I would turn into a robot if I followed all of this new advice. But as Post says goodbye, he delivers some tough love: "Your actions outside of work affect you at work, whether you like it or not. It doesn't turn off at 5 p.m."

By the time I arrive at Samantha von Sperling's home office just off Wall Street a few days later, I am wondering how many bosses and co-workers I have inadvertently offended. (And does one apologize by e-mail?) Von Sperling's stylish loftlike apartment is white, white, white, almost as unsustainable as perfect manners. Naturally, Von Sperling is wearing black. She is gracious, earnest, with a clipped, formal tone. Formerly a dancer and makeup artist, Von Sperling felt a calling to etiquette five years ago. She explains, "I felt surrounded by people who were badly dressed and ill-mannered, and I couldn't take it anymore. I thought this was really a service that humanity needed." Her firm, Polished Social Image Consultants, coaches executives for such companies as Prudential, Bank of America and Deutsche Bank. "The world needs a one-stop spit shine," she says proudly. "That's what I do."

Her mission this evening is to teach me table manners for business meals. I sit at a place setting with an array of cutlery. The fish fork, I learn, is the one with ornate tines--smaller than the main-course fork--meant to debone fish. Here comes another list of rules for me to memorize: When you excuse yourself from the table midmeal, refold your napkin and put it on your chair. When you leave the table for good, put

## TEST YOUR ETIQUETTE

Mark each of these statements true or false. Seven correct, and you're a Biz Et maven. Four or more wrong means you need some lessons.

- 1** At a party, always hold your drink in your left hand.
- 2** Long-stemmed roses are a thoughtful gift to send a sick colleague.
- 3** Dinner is the most meaningful meal for a special business occasion.
- 4** Always interrupt angry callers to calm them.
- 5** After a toast, you should drain your drink.
- 6** Wine and liquor are smart business gifts.
- 7** It is inappropriate to join a group of strangers at a business event.
- 8** It's O.K. to ask a contractor for a rush job even if you don't need it.
- 9** Don't sit at the head or foot of a conference table unless you're the leader.

### ANSWERS

- 1** TRUE That leaves your right hand free for handshakes.
- 2** FALSE They would imply romantic sentiments.
- 3** TRUE Since no one has to return to work, the meal will proceed at a more leisurely pace.
- 4** FALSE Let them rant for a minute. That will usually relieve the rage.
- 5** FALSE The toast is a small speech, not a call to imbibe.
- 6** FALSE Alcohol could insult the receiver or send the wrong message.
- 7** FALSE Attendees of business functions realize that strangers will be introducing themselves.
- 8** FALSE Treat contractors with the same respect as you would clients.
- 9** TRUE Key participants choose their seats first.

Adapted from *The Etiquette Advantage in Business*, by Peggy Post and Peter Post (Collins)

your napkin, neatly folded, to the right of your plate. And if you don't like the food, eat it anyway. Says Von Sperling: "I'm not going to blow a million-dollar deal by offending my hostess. Just open wide and swallow."

Von Sperling teaches me formal Continental-style dining, in which you don't shift your fork to your right hand after cutting. "Most people don't know how to hold the knife and fork correctly. It amazes me how few people actually know this," she says as she demonstrates. "But what if someone says, 'Lady, we're Americans. Why do we need to ape the Europeans?'" I ask her. She looks bruised, and I wonder if she's going to cry. "I don't make up the rules. I just pass them along," she says. "I truly believe that without these rules, humanity is in for a tragic loss. Every single rule of etiquette, every single rule of protocol, every single rule having to do with any kind of social grace comes from one underlying rule, which was respect and hospitality for another person." I am suddenly ashamed. I resolve to come to a greater understanding of the fish fork.

My last seminar is in midtown at Ketchum, a global public relations agency. Ann Marie Sabath, the founder of At Ease Inc., a business-etiquette firm in New York City and Cincinnati, Ohio, that advises such corporations as Procter & Gamble and American Express, is the lunchtime speaker.

Sabath, clad in black, works the room like a nightclub performer, bringing three of the Ketchum executives up for a mildly embarrassing demonstration. Today's lessons are about tricky social situations, the topic of her forthcoming book, *One Minute Manners: Quick Solutions to the Most Awkward Situations You'll Ever Face at Work*. How do you introduce two people whose names you can't remember, for example? Simply delegate, she says. Just ask, "Have the two of you met?", and they'll take over. If you need to introduce your boss and your client, whose name do you use first? The client's, always.

Sabath's advice is practical, grounded in real business dilemmas. How do you develop instant rapport with someone? Ask

a question based on what the person said to you the last time you spoke. One of the Ketchum executives mentions, to great laughter, that a corporate client of hers just told her that his wife had ordered a double oven. Well, said Sabath, next time, first ask your client how his wife is enjoying the double oven, rather than "Did you get that contract signed." That's a signal to the other person, says Sabath, "that nothing has



"Your actions outside of work affect you at work, whether you like it or not. It doesn't turn off at 5 p.m."



crossed my mind except the last thing you mentioned."

All this is just prelude to my last stop. I'm back with Barbara Pachter for a one-on-one coaching session a few weeks later at her stylish home office in Cherry Hill, N.J. If you are a voluntary visitor to Pachter's studio, it means your employer cares enough about you and your future to plunk down more than \$3,000 to smooth your rough edges. But if you appear via corporate command to what has been called charm school, you are probably in manners trouble. Sometimes bosses use Pachter to deliver embarrassing news, like the caution

to the female executive who was wearing a bra that was hopelessly wrong.

Of course, Pachter is wearing black again. She sits me down and puts me through a series of questions, watching me all the while. I tell her about my train ride to nearby Philadelphia that morning and discover that I have just been evaluated on small talk. I pass. (I got into trouble for just that talent in high school.) She asks me about my background, my education. She evaluates my posture (Stand up straighter!), my demeanor (there is a "slight current of negativity"), my conversational mannerisms (I put my hands on my face and forehead, a no-no). We are now in the Mom Zone, times 10. My gestures pass muster, except that I am told I am playing with my bracelet. "I get paid to pick. It's a great job," says Pachter. "We don't expect people to be perfect. We expect them to be professional."

The pickiest part is yet to come. Pachter evaluates my appearance from haircut to shoes. "The first question people need to ask themselves: Is my clothing appropriate—for my job, my profession, my company, my part of the country? What's appropriate for a corporation in New York may be very different than that for a small office in the Southwest. You send a message through your clothing, and you want to know what that is." Then the particulars: "Your glasses are fine. You could go to a slightly hipper style without being funky. Let me see your watch. What kind is it?" A Citizen. "It's an O.K. watch, but if you want to move it up a notch, you have to move up your watch a notch." My carrying case, admittedly plain, needs to go. Get a Coach bag, she advises. I need to upgrade my pen too: a Cross or a Montblanc would be nice.

Name brands. Status symbols. Is that evil? Is that loathsome? Nope. We are talking about getting ahead here. Pachter and her fellow practitioners are offering Biz Et as a path to move you up the business social ladder. At least it's democratic. You don't need an M.B.A. to behave like a businessperson.

For the final round, Pachter and I go to the Fountain, an elegant, chandeliered restaurant at the Four Seasons Hotel in Philly. I'm daydreaming about the Coach bag I'm going to buy. I order fish, and I know exactly which fork to select. I'm a Biz Et grad, after all. Then as I continue my witty repartee, I lean on my bread dish, sending the butter knife clattering to the floor. We both burst out laughing. ■