

Business etiquette and corporate success

It takes just three seconds to make or break a business

By CHERANKA MENDIS

It takes just three seconds to form a first impression. Three seconds for corporates to put their best foot forward and impress and charm their business partners. And in these three seconds, the use of proper business etiquette could add plus points for you and your business, while ignorance of corporate mannerisms can cost you your business.

With Sri Lanka now opening up to international trade, knowing the A-B-Cs of business is an increasingly important factor.

Canada-based Professional Edge Consulting hosted a two-day etiquette workshop titled 'Manners in Management' last week at which the key do's and don'ts of good manners were discussed among participants.

Conducted by Praveeni Perera, Priyangani Pannila Perera and Louise Jackson, the workshops touched on the basic etiquettes, communication etiquette, dining and image consulting. Following are some of the points made at the workshops:

What is business etiquette?

Webster defines etiquette as "the forms, manners, and ceremonies established by convention as acceptable or required in social relations, in a profession, or in official life."

Business etiquette therefore means adopting this in a corporate environment. Good etiquette in the corporate field is a tool to impress colleagues and other companies' one wish to do business with and forms an image of a polished professional. It would make one stand out from others and enhance chances at success.

Greeting professionals

The basics:

- Address the other saying 'hello' not 'hi'

- One should have a firm handshake
- Maintain eye contact through the greeting

- If given name tags, wear them on the right. During handshake, read the card to know the other's name/designation.

- When introducing a colleague/acquaintance to another, introduce them by stating name and designation. Name only is not appropriate.

- Men should not extend hand to a lady first. If she does not offer a handshake and nods, it is not a symbol of disrespect but marks a different cultural upbringing.

- Carry your business card at all times. Keep your cards separately from the ones you receive.

Handshake

An impression of one's personality and character is made based on a handshake. With experts claiming that it takes only three minutes to form a first impression, the handshake is one of the crucial factors in the business world.

A weak handshake portrays a cold, uninterested man lacking confidence, while a handshake with too much pressure describes an overzealous, intimidating character.

- Start with a hello.
- Extend right hand forward with a 'v' formation between thumb and forefinger.
- Do not put too much pressure, nor let it be too limp. The pressure should be as much as one would use to open a refrigerator door.
- Firm shake three or four times.
- Do not create a handshake sandwich by placing left palm on the handshake.

Six introductory mistakes to avoid

1. Looking away when being introduced – gives off impression of disinterest, do not care attitude
2. Overly personal comments – avoid alluding to divorce, job loss, illness and other such sensitive topics
3. Interrupting – do not break into/force yourself in to a conversation. Wait until you are introduced to the group or brought in to the conversation
4. Deferring to one person – avoid talking to one and avoiding the other, especially in a group of three
5. Overly enthusiastic introductions – avoid superfluous introductions as they tend to embarrass people
6. Making someone wait to be introduced – introduce newcomers to group immediately without causing embarrassment or awkwardness to another

Tips to remember

- Prepare self introduction prior to a meeting. Have a well rehearsed introduction ready. However, do not recite.
- Maintain good eye contact, smile, extend right hand.
- Try to match the firmness of the other person's handshake.
- Maintain an open and approachable body language.
- When introducing, introduce people according to title. Superiors first.
- If you forget the name of the person you are introducing, use designation. If both do not come in to mind, ask politely.

Sitting, standing and walking

When greeting: Gentlemen are generally expected to stand when meeting and shaking hands with anyone. Ladies



should stand when greeting another woman senior to them in age or greeting a gentleman senior to them in business.

In a business scenario, men and women should stand when greeting someone who is superior to them in business, a client or potential client and those we show special respect to clergy, religious leader or foreign representative.

Sitting: For ladies, the sitting position differs according to what they are wearing. If wearing pants or long skirt keep legs together. If wearing short skirt or dress, sit with legs crossed at knee or cross ankles and tuck legs to a side.

Men should sit with feet flat on the floor little distance apart or one leg over the other when taking notes. However a man should not sit with the legs crossed and ankle touching the other knee. Both parties should not slouch, or prop your legs on the table, etc.

Standing: Maintain good posture as it shows self confidence with hands by your side. Avoid fidgeting, hands on hips or in pockets, etc.

Walking: Maintain a medium pace. Take equally spaced steps. Try not to swing your arms while walking.

Entering a room: Be confident, smile and maintain eye contact with others maintaining a friendly attitude. Do not amble, walk in a usual pace. If others are behind you, hold door for them or pass on the door before moving ahead.

Communication

The basics:

- Address superior with Sir/Madam, but change according to the business environment.
- Do not feel intimidated to address your boss.
- Address subordinates by first name.
- If there is a stain, etc., on a partner before a meeting, discreetly mention it to them.
- When criticised by your boss maintain composure, try not to get too emotional and consider criticism as valid. If the issue persists, take up the manner in private.
- When communicating with colleague, listen to what they say. Be attentive. Resist urge to jump in to a conversation. Wait for your turn.

Five steps of inclusive communication:

1. **Approaching:** Think strategically about the communication and how it affects people involved.
2. **Listening:** Listen for verbal and non-verbal messages and cues (body language).
3. **Accepting:** Signal acceptance of others and their feeling, verbally and by use of body language and gestures.

4. **Valuing:** Place an emphasis on input and encourage feedback and participation.
5. **Cooperating:** Compromise or amend your requirements to reach an agreement and come to the desired goal or outcome.

Dos and don'ts of communication

- Be an active listener
- Establish eye contact
- Respect personal space (roughly 18-24 inches)
- Avoid swear words, vulgar and crude remarks
- Do not ask personal questions
- Avoid sensitive small talk – politics, religion, controversial issues
- Stick to positive topics – world news, food, hobbies, weather
- Do not gossip or spread rumours

In the boardroom

The basics:

- Always remember, punctuality is key.
- Arrive five minutes before the scheduled time of meeting.
- Try to arrive before your bosses and superiors. Coming late shows a lack of professionalism.
- Always keep your word, avoid cancellation as much as possible.
- The highest in the hierarchy sits at the head of the table, placed at the furthest end from the meeting door.
- One could sit after the superiors have taken their. You can pick your seats as you wish if it is your colleagues.
- Do not interrupt presenter. Raise hand if you wish to speak.
- Questions should be asked at the end of the presentation or meeting.

Tips for organisers:

- If it is an internal meeting, inform participants 24 hours prior to the time of the scheduled meeting. For clients, give them a week's notice. Call and confirm two days ahead of time.
- **When communicating:**
 - Identify with the purpose and goals of the meeting
 - Invite only those who need to be there. Send memos to the others afterwards as 'for your information'
 - Set an agenda, prepare and distribute it ahead of time
 - Segment the meeting with breaks
 - Start meeting on time
 - Conclude the meeting by summing up the important points discussed at the meeting
- **Tips for participants:**
 - Respond to invitations in a timely manner. If unaware of availability, let the organisers know when you can confirm.
 - At the meeting:
 - Bring materials as informed to you

(notebook and pen, etc.)

- Be on time
- Have business cards ready
- Portray a positive demeanour, maintain eye contact
- Avoid arguments with other parties
- Remain engaged, do not day dream
- If losing concentration start taking notes
- Follow through with any assignments as discussed
- Do not contradict others. Interrupt politely if you need to make a point

Tips for presenters:

- Arrive 10 minutes early and set up the presentation, etc. The presenter has the additional task of being a host and greeting others as they come in through the door.

Do's and don'ts in the boardroom:

- Be prepared, always take pen and paper
- If taking a laptop, do not disturb the others with your typing
- Look attentive
- Write down questions and prepare beforehand for the meeting
- Do not leave cell phones out on the table
- Switch off cell phone or set it off to silent during the meeting
- No texting
- If you need to make a call, inform leader ahead of time
- Avoid bringing food and beverages to the meeting
- Bringing a water bottle is appropriate

ate if others are bringing as well

- Do not joke with/engage in personal conversations with others during the meeting

Telephone etiquette

There are 5 Cs in telephone etiquette – cordial, clear, concise, correct and close, which one must stick to when conducting a conversation on the phone.

- Be cordial when using the telephone for business purposes. Identify yourself with "Hello, (name) speaking. How can I help you?"
- Have a clear tone of voice. Do not raise your voice.
- Time is a factor. Be concise on the phone.
- Give correct information on the phone. Know the basics of the company, etc. If unknown, transfer the call.
- Be courteous when you close the conversation. Add a phrase like "have a good day" at the end of the conversation.
- It is not okay to not return a phone call.
- Always call back if unable to talk at the moment the call came in, etc.
- Having a fancy ring tone is not appropriate at business meetings.

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Talk slowly
 Communicate
 Listen attentively
 Empathise with the caller
 Pick up the phone within two to three rings
 Have a good attitude
 Offer your service
 Note down important information
 End on a positive note
 Smile

Dress right

For men:

- The tie should always match the suit not the shirt
- On dress down Fridays wear jeans if permitted or dress pants
- Tight fitting shirts are not suitable for office wear
- A T-shirt with a suit is not appropriate office wear for a corporate professional
- A tight fitting suit with short sleeves is not tasteful

For women:

- Trendy ¾ sleeve blazers can be worn with pants or skirt
- Have a classic suit made to fit – not loose or too tight worn with a camisole
- Appropriate office wear pants – not tight at the thighs and flat at the stomach
- A well fitted pencil skirt at the correct length is appropriate
- A well tailored dress in a solid colour or a classic black dress serves well for a cocktail event
- Too short a skirt portrays an outfit that it is not well put together
- Bright coloured pants are not suitable for a professional
- An ill fitted shirt either too baggy or too tight is not for office wear. Shirt should be fitted to reflect the figure
- A casual Friday look with jeans or well suited pants gives a professional appearance. Nude shoes would match jeans or black pants

Pix by Upul Abayasekara



Canada-based Professional Edge Consulting's Praveeni Perera (left) with Louise Jackson



Professional Edge Consulting's Priyangani Pannila Perera

