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BUSINESS

Making Business Dining Successful

Written by Beverly Langford
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A business meal is a great way to build relationships in a professional context. But, business dining can get complicated because it's not completely business and not entirely social. Maintaining the boundaries of each aspect and creating the right atmosphere can be challenging at best and disastrous at worst.

Christopher Elliott wisely notes that a business meal "is part meal, part meeting. It's informal, but at the same time there's a long list of unwritten rules that can't be broken."
<http://www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness/resources/management/customer-relations/5-business-lunch-faux-pas.aspx#businesslunchfauxpas>

If you want to host a business meal, keep in mind a few caveats to make the process rewarding and enjoyable.

Dine with a Purpose

Are you thanking someone for a job well done, discussing a possible strategic partnership, or taking another look at a possible candidate for that position you need to fill? A pleasant, unhurried meal is a great way to build rapport and strengthen an association. If, however, you're negotiating for your next office lease, and the conversation may get heated, then the discussion needs to take place in a conference room. Further, it's not a good idea to mix calamari with contracts, so if your meeting involves documents and worksheets, choose an office where you have access to necessary resources and space to spread without ending up with grease spots on a blueprint.

Keep in mind that every business situation doesn't lend itself to business dining, and identifying your objective can help you make a smart decision.

Choose a Location that Fits the Occasion

The latest hot "see and be seen" spot may not work in your favor for a business meal. Choose a restaurant where you have dined before, is easy for your guest to find, has plenty of parking, and maintains a manageable noise level. You don't want too quiet because you don't want other patrons listening to your discussion, but you also need to be able to interact at the volume of a normal conversation.

Consider choosing two suitable places and allowing your guest to pick the one that he or she prefers.

Make sure that you're there on time, and let the maître d' or wait staff know that you want to take care of the check.

Mind your Manners

Even though our society is becoming increasingly casual, a few fundamental rituals surrounding dining with others and in public still hold true. Being comfortable with basic table etiquette allows you to concentrate on your guest and the conversation without agonizing over which fork to use.

Choose something easy to eat (unlike lobster or crab claws, for example), and know what to do with your napkin (in your lap when you first sit down and, in your chair if you have to leave during the meal). Remember that alcohol, as Elliott notes, has caused many business meals to end badly. Avoid it at lunch and go easy on it at dinner.

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Give your Guest your Full Attention

Business dining requires an investment in time, energy, and money. If you can't devote the time to have a relaxed meal, choose another day. Turn off your electronic companions, and focus on the conversation and the relationship. Make the person feel special for joining you, even if you may be deciding that he or she isn't really right for the job. Deliver that message at another time.

End the Meal Gracefully

Since you are hosting the event, it's your responsibility to bring the occasion to a close. Ask for the check, summarize the meeting, and thank your guest for joining you. It's a nice touch to wait until your guest is on his or her way (car, cab, or other transportation) before you leave the parking lot or valet area.

And what if you are the guest? That's a discussion for next time.

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