

Are bad manners bad for business? Pam Fay of Business Performance Perspectives (BPP) certainly believes so and she recently launched a new consulting arm to tackle what she says is a growing problem for Irish industry.

As business executives struggle to maintain a balance between the working world and their personal lives, stress levels are reaching an all time high for many. Such pressure can lead to situations where manners are forgotten and rudeness takes over.

It is thought that as many as 40% of all adults experience some degree of social anxiety, which can translate inadvertently into bad social skills and a poor approach to other people. Many people equate bad manners with a lack of respect so it's particularly important for companies never to allow such an impression to take hold through any of their staff, lest your organisation loses business as a result.

In today's competitive commercial environment, it's essential to have the tools to conduct business with confidence. Research conducted by Harvard University, The Carnegie Foundation, and the Stanford Research Institute shows that technical skills and knowledge account for only 15% of getting, keeping and advancing in a job while 85% of job success is connected to people skills.

I established BPP in 2003 to assist companies to deliver their strategic plans through best practice business performance management by setting achieving and surpassing goals. We now offer two Business Etiquette programmes, one for businesses and one for individuals. The programmes enable business people to project a polished image with character and competence, establish rapport with others more easily, and put people at ease so that business can be conducted more successfully.

I designed the business programme to ensure that management and staff represent their organisation in a consistently professional manner. The programme for individuals is targeted at people who want to ensure that they have the best business manners possible when applying for a new role, promotion or when setting up a business themselves. Course attendees learn simple ways to be consistently professional and mannerly in their dealings with business contacts be it in person, on the telephone or by email. Manners are at the foundation of all good business relationships and our courses are designed to give business people the confidence to handle a wide variety of work and social situations.

The top ten business mistakes* have been identified as:

1. Negative attitudes
2. Sloppy message taking
3. Making people wait
4. Criticising people in front of others
5. Disregard for social courtesies at business events
6. Errors with names
7. Vulgar language
8. Inappropriate clothing
9. Foregoing introductions
10. Giving someone the run around

There are many benefits associated with completing one of our business etiquette programmes, including increased opportunities for new business development, giving professionals the tools to impress and build business relationships, making awkward business situations more comfortable, building confidence and helping to create winning business styles and enabling professionals to stay one step ahead of the competition. These courses will ensure that employees are creating the right impression at every client meeting and contact.

The courses cover topics such as greetings and introductions, business attire, as well as etiquette in the workplace, at business meetings, functions and trade shows. Course participants are also advised on effective communication skills, table manners and simple rules for etiquette in every day life. There are a range of modules within the programme that can be tailored to the exact needs of a particular company.

For businesses, we can tailor the courses to suit an organisation's particular needs. They can be conducted with individual employees or groups of ten or fewer at the company's premises or an external location. Individuals can also choose an open course with no more than ten participants, or a private session for one to one coaching.

The programmes can be conducted at a company's premises or an off-site location. A course typically lasts one working day and participants receive a full set of reference materials.

Bad manners can be as simple as sneezing down the phone, hanging up too abruptly or talking across a table with a piece of food stuck to your teeth. People make many common mistakes which can resonate negatively in a client focussed meeting. Our courses address these mistakes and teach you how to represent your company in a consistent and positive manner.

Personal performance is a key element of business performance. For example, having good manners is a key business tool but few managers consider the cost of bad manners. Organisations need to be confident that their employees are treating clients with the respect and professionalism they deserve.

Your inability to handle yourself as expected in a business situation could be expensive. No one will tell you the real reason why you didn't get the

job, the promotion, or make the cut for a social engagement. People you meet make judgements on your ability based on your behaviour. You have some control over the way that people perceive you and that control is etiquette. In an increasingly competitive, global marketplace, the companies that distinguish themselves will place a high priority on consumer and customer service. Participants will leave these courses with a sense of clarity on manners in key business areas and the knowledge to ensure better relationships with clients, suppliers and colleagues. Better manners mean better business.

Etiquette says a lot about you as a person. Some simple rules to follow in all business and social situations are as follows:

- Be honest at all times in your dealings with others
- Be consistent in your communications
- Admit mistakes, there is nothing wrong with saying “I was wrong.”
- Be punctual; if you’re running late call ahead and apologise, giving the time you estimate you will arrive; make sure to apologise again when you reach your destination
- Choose your words carefully – think before you speak
- Handle conflict with grace – try to reach a compromise between all parties
- Don’t leave a situation unresolved – deal with the issue at hand

Greetings and introductions can often cause problems. A greeting is an acknowledgement of someone else’s presence and it is good manners to always acknowledge someone that you have met before. A general rule is to stand when greeting someone. It is important to look at the person to whom you are making the introduction and also to remember to speak to the most senior or important person in the group first as a mark of respect.

When speaking to a business contact on the telephone you should speak in your regular conversational tone. It is polite to divert calls to your voicemail service when you’re in a meeting, a restaurant or other busy areas. The people you are with should take precedence over calls you want to make or receive. However, if you are expecting a call that can’t be postponed, you should alert your companions ahead of time and excuse yourself when the call comes in. Use discretion when discussing private matters or certain business topics in front of others and don’t display anger during a public call.

With the advent of email communication as a business norm, etiquette for electronic communication is becoming increasingly important. Knowing that an email can come across in unintended ways is something to bear in mind; you should review all emails before hitting the send button. Business people are advised to use the same courtesy that they would in conversation. A clear subject line helps to avoid confusion and makes it easier for busy executives to decide on the urgency of an email. Responding to emails in a timely manner is good manners.

Eating out in a business context presents many challenges but by adhering to these simple guidelines executives are less likely to unnecessarily offend a business contact. You should look to your host for seating arrangements and guidance on ordering food. Napkins should be placed on your lap when seated, on your chair if you excuse yourself from the table and at the side of your plate when the meal is over. Ensure that you push your chair under the table when leaving the table

It is polite to wait till everyone has been served and the host commences his/her dinner before beginning to eat. Practice correct posture by keeping a straight back and bring food to your mouth and not your head to the plate.

Eating at the same pace as your fellow diners demonstrates politeness as does maintaining conversation with the people to your left and right throughout the meal.

Eat bread by cutting or breaking off small pieces of bread from your side plate and take butter from the butter dish and place on your side plate. Pass the salt and pepper together.

Always keep your mouth closed while eating and don't attempt to talk and eat at the same time. Ensure that you pass dishes adjacent to you to other guests so they don't have to stretch. Limit yourself to two alcoholic drinks at a business event.

Cutlery should be rested on the plate while in conversation and should never be used to express a point. The golden rule is that diners should be consistent and predictable.

Your dress should be understated at all times and you should aim to represent your organisation in a positive and professional manner. Executives looking to progress their career should dress for the job they want, not the job they hold. Keep clothing neat and clean and don't reveal too much. It is professional to dress appropriately for the time of day and to avoid being a fashion victim.

Remembering these final pointers will get you through any business interaction:

- Ensure that the tone of your conversation is positive
- Make good eye contact
- Ensure that your verbal and non verbal messages say the same thing
- Ask questions and listen
- Don't swear
- Pay attention to those around you
- If you start with positive intent, you are well on the journey
- Smile

Full details on the courses on offer and a Business Etiquette quiz are available at www.businessetiquette.ie

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*Source: (The Mitchell Organisation, Philadelphia