



Business Etiquette: A Back-To-Basics Approach

Listen closely, I've got a secret for you: There's a way you can stand head and shoulders above your competition, and it costs you nothing but a little time and effort. I'm talking about good manners – or what's known in the business world as etiquette. This is an area where a small distributor can set himself apart and really shine.

Right or wrong, business associates will judge you by your manners. Knowing the proper way to respond in any situation will enhance your career, your company ... not to mention your bottom line.

The Right Form

The technological revolution has given birth to a slew of new daily business practices. From voicemail to cell phones to e-mail, it pays to know what's correct. The following list is a primer on what the experts consider proper business etiquette in these areas:

1. **Voicemail** – Leave messages that are short and to the point. Always leave your first and last name, company name (and ASI number when talking to suppliers) and the purpose of the call. Don't ramble, and be sure to speak slowly and clearly, especially when leaving your telephone number. Speaking of voicemail, when was the last time you listened to your own company message? Make sure the message is upbeat, professional and clearly identifies your firm and the type of products you sell. If your company has a Web site, include the domain name on your voicemail message.
2. **Cell Phones** – If you carry one on business appointments, turn the ringer off and set it on vibrate mode. If you *must* make a call, find a quiet, secluded corner where you'll not be disturbing anyone. Have voicemail on your cell phone so that you're not interrupted during business meetings. You want your client to feel she is your top priority. Answering your cell phone during a meeting sends the opposite message.

3. **E-mail** – Find out in advance if your customers prefer this means of communication. When sending mass e-mails about products and special offers, always insert a clause at the end where the customer can opt out of receiving any future e-mails.
4. **Confirmation Letters** – Acknowledge all orders with a confirmation letter or a copy of the order. Have your client check the order for accuracy *before* the order is produced. This goes a long way toward eliminating problems that may arise once the order is complete.
5. **Follow Up** – Always follow up with your customers after the sale and take care of any problems promptly. This sets you apart as being in the business for the long haul, not just the quick sale.

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6. **Thank-You Letters** – We all like to feel appreciated. A short, personal, handwritten note is appropriate in all situations. Better yet, include a promotional product with your thank-you. This will not only show that you're polite, but also creative, with the added bonus of showing you believe in what you sell. Also remember to thank your suppliers for a job well done.
7. **Familiarity** – Never assume anything. Business meetings with clients should relate to business. Discussions of politics and religion should be

avoided. Follow your customer's tone and always take the high road. Don't knock your competitors; instead, highlight areas where you shine.

8. Cultural/Regional Differences – When dealing with customers from different regions of the country or parts of the world, find out ahead of

time what is considered acceptable. People work at different paces depending on where they're from. Don't alienate your customers by imposing your style on them. This is a time that "When in Rome ..." applies.

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9. Punctuality – Time is our most precious commodity. In this day and age when all businesspeople feel the time crunch, show your professionalism by arriving on time and respecting your customer's schedule.

10. Dress – Your attire should reflect the mode of dress of the company you're calling on. When in doubt, check with the human resources department ahead of time. Remember, business casual doesn't mean shabby. You need not be in a business suit, but you do need to be neat and well-groomed. As a general rule of thumb, it never hurts to be dressed just a little better than your customer is dressed. ■

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