



MODERN MANNERS

In today's global economy, just how relevant is the world of etiquette? **Georgina Wilson-Powell** speaks to several modern day 'Miss (and Mr.) Manners' in an effort to find out



It's time to throw old ideas about etiquette out the window. In the past, rules of conduct and deportment were meant to secure and refine separate social classes.

Modern etiquette is a different game. It's a lesson in international relations – something tied to being able to conduct business all over the world and feel at home wherever your jet lands.

What exactly is meant when talking about good international etiquette? Is it knowing when to bow, courtesy or hold a door open? Hardly, says Catherine Soulas-Baron, the woman behind Le Savoir-Vivre Ltd Academy of Etiquette and Modern Manners in Hong Kong.

Today's etiquette is about refining a person's 'softer skills'. These can make a positive impression, lending a competitive edge in today's marketplace.

"A good reputation and a good education based on displaying distinction and elegance, as well as generosity and graciousness, always confers advantages," she notes.

"A well-raised person is attentive towards others, knows how to interact with others and knows all of the social codes. His or her social position is thus strengthened. As for business prestige, many firms seek professionals who can perform perfectly in a globalised workplace."

DO WE NEED IT?

In a word, yes.

While everyone (from children watching videos on YouTube to CEOs) is more aware of the world's various culture differences, and a more Westernised manner has been adopted for many business occasions, a deeper understanding of different cultures is essential for success.

"The aim of etiquette today is to be inclusive, rather than exclusive," explains Tamiko Zablith, Managing Director of Minding Manners/International Etiquette and Protocol Academy of London. "As such greater emphasis is put on learning the values of other cultures, so as not to cause offense unknowingly."

"Our multicultural world imposes new conditions for living harmoni-

ously together," explains Soulas-Baron. The challenge, she continues, is in recognising the differences across cultures. Take into account only your own group, and communication breaks down.

"That is why, now more than ever, providing training regarding etiquette plays a fundamental role. We seek to increase understanding, opportunities for adaptation and adjustment, professional effectiveness, tolerance and respect for others, in order to achieve a certain level of multicultural harmony."

THE DANGER OF DINING

While there's acceptance across the board that networking and meetings have become more informal, the domain of the dining table has become more complex. Don't be fooled by today's informality into thinking table manners only mattered in the past (when there were 20 courses to consume, each with their own cutlery). The rules are more opaque than ever before; and as a result, even more difficult to navigate successfully.

"There has been a definite overall relaxing of manners. Parents are far less strict with their children than before [at the table]. The idea that by simply paying for something, you are entitled to do whatever you like is becoming ever more widespread. Portable telephones have become a scourge; people can no longer remain at a table for two hours without checking their messages or answering calls and place them on the table. Proper etiquette stipulates that no personal objects should be placed on the table," says Soulas-Baron.

It's such an issue that Soulas-Baron's company offers a course specifically on table manners for fine dining, while Zablith parcels it up within a five day 'Finishing Touches' course. It is her number-one area for errors that people make.

"Table manners have substantially declined, and have been cited by numerous Human Resource Managers as a key reason for displaced client relationships," explains Zablith.

So whether it's knowledge or know-how, a desire to learn or a need to not offend, modern etiquette courses are not just back in fashion - they're more in need than ever. ♦

THE DELIGHTFUL DINNER GUEST

From forks to bread rolls, here are global tips for timeless table manners

China

Meals tend to be in public places. If you're invited to a home, know it's a great honour. Be sure to arrive punctually, removing your shoes at the door, and carrying a small gift for the host. At the table, wait to be told where to sit. Return your chopsticks to the chopstick stand. While out in public, tipping is quite tricky and can be seen as an insult. A few coins are often sufficient.

Italy

Punctuality is flexible in places like Rome, and arriving even 15 minutes late isn't seen as an insult. Do show up dressed quite stylishly (even if the invite says 'informal'), with a jacket and tie for men. Bring a small gift, like wine or chocolate, to the party. At the table, hold your cutlery in the Continental style, with fork in left, and knife in right. Don't rest your elbows on the table. Don't keep your hands in your lap.

England

It's often perceived as rude to arrive late to a meal. The fork is held in the left, knife in the right. Remain standing until invited to sit, and once seated, keep your elbows off the table. To indicate you are finished eating, rest your knife and fork parallel along the

right side of the plate. When in a pub, it's common for drinks to be purchased in a 'round'; one person buys for the entire group, then everyone repeats the favour.

Germany

Punctuality is crucial. Don't arrive early or late. If you must be beyond 15 minutes late, telephone to explain why. The following day, a hand-written thank you note is appreciated. At the table, stand until invited to sit. Cutlery is held in the Continental fashion, fork in left and knife in right. Don't begin eating until the host starts. Fold lettuce in a salad rather than cutting it. Rolls are torn apart by hand. To indicate you're finished eating, rest your knife and fork parallel on the right side of the plate, with your fork over the knife.

Middle East

Punctuality is expected of westerners, although for the locals the concept of time is more relaxed. It's not unusual to be kept waiting, and it's considered rude to mention such. Be sure to dress conservatively, and keep elbows off the table. If you are at a table where food is shared, be sure to pick up food with your right hand, never your left. Leave some food on your plate to indicate to your host that you are unable to eat anymore and have finished.