

TULSA WORLD

Etiquette more than right fork



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Last week was National Business Etiquette Week. If you didn't hear about it, don't consider it a serious breach of duty, since it was billed as the "first" and followed the regular National Etiquette Week by just seven days.

Still, I got an e-mail about NBEW and decided to spend some time observing manners and protocol to see if I could notice any improvement during the event.

Unfortunately, I think NBEW may need to build some momentum, as I saw the usual amount of questionable behavior occurring in the usual categories.

I'm sure I make my share of etiquette gaffes (silverware positioning can still trip me up), but I also try to make an effort in several areas.

It's always interesting at a lunch or dinner meeting to see if everyone at the table is going to wait to start eating until all diners have been served.

Often there is a tolerance level of a few minutes before someone begins poking meat lightly with a fork. But if the delay stretches out -- the waiter is looking for the veggie meal, for instance -- look out.

I had a seminar participant in just that situation recently go from impatiently tapping on his glass to a voracious dive into his salad as his patience wore out. Eyebrows were raised, but he had committed and wasn't going to turn back.

I, and several others, refrained until the woman at my right was served.

The other breach I see fairly frequently is a male business person making eye contact and speaking directly to another male when the second man also has a female associate along.

I always get uncomfortable when this happens, and try to direct the conversation toward the woman in the group. That tactic doesn't always work, however.

And, while I'm on a rant, I'll add this: Apple CEO Steve Jobs can get away with a black collarless knit shirt at business events. The rest of us can't.

One area professional who observed National Business Etiquette Week was Rachel Wagner. But, you might have expected it, as she's founder and director of Broken Arrow-based Rachel Wagner Etiquette and Protocol.

She sent me a few of her tips for summer business etiquette, including:

Keep a sports coat at your office. “Even if you don’t plan to wear a suit to work during the summer, a sports coat is essential to enhance your professional image when meeting clients or guests,” Wagner says.

“For women, a perky sweater set is casual and comfortable for summer office wear, yet looks professional as well.”

Handshaking knows no seasons. Always give a firm handshake -- two to three pumps -- when arriving at and leaving from any business setting, she advises.

Watch the cell phone. Joining a client or colleague for a meal on a restaurant patio doesn’t mean you are free to conduct cell phone calls and disrupt other patrons.

“If you must make or receive an important business call while dining outdoors, please be professional by excusing yourself; and walking to a quiet spot away from other outdoor diners,” Wagner says.

Remember table manners for summer salad days. “Business relationships are often developed over meals, and nothing can detract from a relationship like poor table manners,” the etiquette specialist says.

Salads, in particular, offer opportunities to offend. “Use your knife to cut salad greens into smaller, bite-size pieces,” she says.

Wagner’s last suggestion reminded me of a story I read a few years back. The author was interviewing a top corporate executive at lunch.

As the salad was served, the writer was startled to see the well-dressed man ignore his fork and knife and grab the lettuce with both hands, stuffing it into his mouth with the zeal of a rescued sailor.

The reporter was taken aback, but later reasoned that the primal attack on the salad was an authentic representation of how the man approached business and why he was successful.

I’m not convinced, however. I’ve eaten with plenty of powerful CEOs, and none of them treated a salad with such disregard.

I’m sticking with my fork.