

# Business lunch etiquette: how to work the room like a pro

Dining etiquette is part of professional brand management and is highly important when it comes to business lunches. Taking your client out for lunch is a great way to build the relationship and improve your chance of securing the deal – however, not all brokers seem to get it right. Image Group International's *Jon-Michail* has some pointers



## Seating arrangements

When dining with clients, the host always offers the best or first choice of seat to their guest. Let them pick which is the best seat for them because you can't always understand what they want or need.

## What to wear

Dress appropriately for the time, place and reason for the event. Is it the first time you have met the client? Is it an ongoing relationship? If the guest is a friend and it's more of a social situation, dress can be more casual, but consider whether you are likely to run into a client.

## Venue choice

The venue must also be congruent to the nature and aim of the meeting. What do you want to get out of it and where do you want to play the game – world class, big city or small town? My advice is to take life lightly, but take business seriously. Everyone wants to be high quality and people's standards of world class differ. Consider what the client sees as being 'world class' and package the meeting to meet their expectations.

## Food and drink choices

In regard to food, choose something that is not too messy, so keep away from spaghetti bolognese, or crab claws. Simple choices mean no mess. This can be of particular importance where suits and ties are concerned.

As for alcohol, this would be kept to a minimum for a business lunch. Perhaps one glass of wine or beer. Two to three people could share a bottle of wine – but not five! Spirits are a big no-no. Business lunchers used to drink scotch and coke but today this choice would probably signify an alcoholic.

## Conversation topics

Think of personal opening lines. These will depend on whether you know the person or it is a first meeting. Think of the smiles, the hellos, and ensure you are friendly and authentic, not stuck-up as though you consider yourself better than them – you would get buried very quickly with this attitude in Australia. The opening line could be regarding the traffic, such as "gee it took 45 minutes to get across the city ...". The busier you are the more you hate small talk, but in a lunch situation, it is acceptable.

Lighten up the atmosphere and conversation before you get down to serious business – save this until after lunch has been served and eaten. Perhaps comment about the food, for example, "the food looks great", or "I always manage to get teriyaki sauce on my tie!" The latter is a good way to underplay your influence and make your guest feel at ease. Build rapport around the family if they have one, but don't talk about your kids if the guest is single. Don't talk about nightclubs if the guest is conservative.

## Length of lunch

One and a half hours is a good time. One hour is too quick and will not give you time to talk. If you or the guest is in a rush, there would be some question over how serious either party was anyway.

## Settling the bill

This is where the "abundance conscious" theory comes into play. The host must always pay for a business lunch. Never go 'Dutch' unless they are a friend or it is a social occasion where no one will be offended. Settling the bill is particularly important if you are there to impress. If it is acceptable to split the bill, split it evenly. Don't start adding up exactly what you ate and suggest you pay for that only, it puts a real dampener on the night.

## Final tips

Don't over-plan. Be perceived as influential and in control and establish an easy communication and rapport. Taking clients for lunch will give you a stronger connection and increase your resource base, number of potential clients, contacts and friends. The guests are comfortable and can relax more than if in an office. Doing business over lunch or any meal is common practice across the world, particularly in the US, UK and Asia, where the latter regards dinner as especially important. The best relationships and some of the biggest

deals are made when sharing a meal. However, people are generally not good at making relationships and don't see business lunches as resourceful. To the contrary, they can enhance your career opportunities, and most importantly, they can be fun. They help increase your self-confidence as the host, and lastly, business lunches and hospitality provide you with new knowledge through the conversation you exchange. ■

*Jon-Michail*, Image Group International CEO is an award-winning author, speaker, image coach and just designer with *Christian Dior*. Contact details: Image Group International, Asia-Pacific head office, Devon House, 47 Daring Street, South Yarra, Victoria 3141. Tel: (03) 9630 4449. E-mail: [jonmichail@imagegroup.com.au](mailto:jonmichail@imagegroup.com.au)

