

# The Communicator

A resource for pharmacy students from Pfizer Pharmaceuticals and APhA-ASP

## Decoding the secrets of business etiquette

### *Best advice is to leave a positive impression*

By Tasha Space



"I heard that you were eating off of someone else's plate at the company meeting." My boss's words ripped through me like an unforeseen hurricane. "That's not appropriate behavior," she said. It was my first performance review at my first job out of graduate school. My peer and client feedback was outstanding, yet this is the only piece of specific feedback that I will ever remember from that day.

Never mind that it was not a company meeting, or that it was the director of the department who told me to try his half-eaten roasted lamb shank. "We were drinking. ... It was dinner. ... It was... We were... It was after the meeting. ... We went out. ..." My words squeaked out of me, each half-formed syllable strung together in an incomprehensible stutter. Not that my words even mattered. Nothing could have spoken louder than the cherry flush burning its way from the nape of my neck to the tip of my hairline.

I have since thought a lot about that occurrence, and there is not a word that properly captures the emotion I felt that day. It was a peculiar combination of rage and humiliation that I have not experienced since. I've realized that what bothered me the most about my boss's comment is that not only was it completely out of context, but that in lecturing me on the rules of business etiquette, she was in violation of the very subject she was so profusely defending.

#### Making an impression

Seven years and an untold number of business dinners later, I still can't tell the salad fork from the dinner fork, and I still might eat off of the plate of someone who enjoys the ritual of sharing, because it is not the written rules of business etiquette that matter. What matters is understanding that business etiquette comes down to leaving a positive impression on any person with whom you have an interaction.

Business etiquette exists so people will know how to behave in

such a way that is appropriate for specific situations. Every company and every culture, however, has a different set of customs that define what is considered appropriate behavior. And while behaving appropriately is important, being impressive is even more important for long-term career growth. This is the real secret of business etiquette.

Here are some tips for leaving a positive and lasting impression that will help you get ahead.

**Think about the feelings of others.** When I was 16 years old, I read two books that majorly influenced my life at that time: Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. I don't remember much about Margaret, but I still remember Carnegie's advice: "If there is any one secret of success, it lies in the ability to get the other person's point of view and see things from that person's angle as well as from your own," or more simply, "bait the hook to suit the fish." When we consciously take the time to think about what some-

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one else is thinking or feeling and try to accommodate his or her needs, we make a lasting impression. In fact, if we spent less time worrying about what other people think of us, and more time thinking about what other people worry about, other people would think a whole lot more of us.

**Respect customs and cultures.** Acting in a way that is in accordance with the preferences, values, and customs of another person says, “I respect you.” And if you want to be respected, show respect. Tom is my best friend’s dad. Tom has an irrational contempt for guys who wear baseball caps inside his house. To Tom, this behavior is an act of utter disrespect. To my husband, this behavior means nothing more than that he has not taken a shower. However, it is good etiquette for my husband to respect Tom’s wishes, because my husband respects Tom.

**Talk in terms of “You” not “I.”** “You” just might be the most irresistible word in the English language. That’s because people are far more interested in themselves than in anything else in the world. So, don’t say, “I am going to talk about this new technology that has all the latest innovations.” Instead say, “You are going to learn about this new technology that’s going to make your life easier.” People will be irresistibly drawn to what you have to say.

**Use the language of leaders.** Humans are a funny bunch. There is not a whole lot that makes sense in how we make sense of things. The truth is that we form opinions quickly and change them slowly. And a lot of the time, our opinions are formed based on intangible cues about another person—the way they walk, dress, and speak. If you want to make a positive impression, be impressionable. For example, don’t discount what you’re about to say by prefacing it with “this is just my opinion” or “I could be wrong but ...” or “I’m not sure if this is right, but ...”. If you give the impression that you don’t trust yourself, why should I trust you? Leaders speak with confidence and instill confidence in others through their language. Leaders say “I believe.” And guess what, others believe them, too.

**Practice active listening.** Have you ever witnessed a conversation between two people who were just waiting for their turn to speak? I have, and it usually happens in business meetings. While person A is talking, the only thing person B is listening to is the conversation he is having in his head, which is usually about the point he wants to make next. Listening is a skill that needs to be practiced. It’s hard to really listen to what someone else is saying without being distracted by the to-do list in your head, or by the guy running by with yellow feathers sticking out of his ears. But if you can really hear what someone is saying and respond to that, you will make the person feel valued, and that person will, in turn, value you.

**Show appreciation.** I can tell you unequivocally that people just want to feel appreciated, and when they feel appreciated, they will appreciate you. Are you starting to pick up on a theme? Say “thank you,” say “please,” and acknowledge people’s time. Have you ever done something for someone else that was not acknowl-

edged? How did it make you feel about that person? It makes me want to rip their small mind out of their big head.

**Know thyself.** A former co-worker, George, and I once worked with a client, Martin. Martin was oblivious to how people felt about him. He was arrogant, condescending, and often spoke to his employees in a way that made them resentful of the work they

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### Business etiquette tips

- Little things mean a lot. Smile at people. Say please and thank you.
- Respect other people’s space. Don’t touch people unless you know them well and are sure that they are receptive. Handshakes, pats on the shoulder, and a touch on the elbow are usually fine. Hugs, kisses, and jolly slaps on the backside are not.
- In someone else’s office, avert your eyes when you see a document open on the computer. Resist the urge to read others’ caller identification when the phone rings. Don’t pick up or read things on other people’s desks.
- Only page people or call a cell phone if the problem absolutely cannot wait.
- Be aware of time of day. Never call employees or business associates at home unless it’s an emergency, and call after 8:00 am or before 9:30 pm. Always apologize for intruding. Avoid scheduling meetings or calling for information during an employee’s lunch. Let your staff know what hours are acceptable at your home for calls; if you have an early shift, for example, you might tell them they can call you at home for emergency sick leave approval anytime after 5:30 am.
- Don’t interrupt. Let others finish their thoughts before responding.
- Don’t put your belongings on someone else’s desk, table, or work area. Place your briefcase on your lap or on the floor when you visit others. If you need to borrow someone’s work station, ask permission, and leave it the way you found it (or a littler better).
- Carry your belongings in one neat, attractive bag. Sort through your briefcase daily, so documents are not neglected inadvertently.
- Don’t monopolize conversations.
- Respond to invitations promptly. When someone invites you to a meeting, conference, luncheon, or party, respond by the RSVP date (put it on your calendar so you won’t forget). If you can’t attend, simply apologize and say you have another commitment. If you have to cancel at the last minute, call and explain why. Send an alternate and any items you were supposed to provide.
- Look like you’re having a good time, even if it kills you. Bad meeting? No need to yawn, make faces, or sigh. Boring lecture? Falling asleep? Quietly excuse yourself, walk around, or splash water on your face. Chew gum unobtrusively, pinch yourself, or eat a mint.
- Return what you borrow promptly. Reference books, clinical guidelines, and even drugs may be needed quickly in pharmacies, and we may borrow them from a colleague, a satellite, or a neighboring pharmacy. If you’re forgetful, make a note on your calendar reminding yourself to return the items.
- When in doubt, emulate others you admire.

From: *Supervision: A Pharmacy Perspective* (APhA, 2003).

your mentor's professionalism. Work on developing professionally throughout all of the steps of your pharmacy education. Finally, be an example for others! Be the kind of pharmacist you would want your family to interact with.

**TC: How does professionalism translate into patient care, and why is it important?**

**Traynor:** Patients must first trust you and realize the knowledge you have to improve their medication use. This is a direct reflection of your professionalism, and it is an indicator of what your patients can expect from their pharmacist. To provide patient care, one must be creative and innovative, trustworthy, and service-oriented, all traits of a professional. Professionalism is a big part of the foundation for providing patient care and is a baseline characteristic that must be grasped to learn any other

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were doing. One day, George said to me, "I can't believe Martin is so unaware of his behavior. How can he not see the way that he acts?" Because George was exactly like Martin, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. But the question made me realize that many of us do not take the time to examine our own behavior. Are you aware of how your behavior is perceived by others? Do you speak too briskly? Are you so polite that you come across as rude? Do you snap at people unknowingly? If you are unsure, ask someone close to you. You just might be surprised to find out something new about yourself that the rest of the world already knows.

**Do your homework.** It amazes me that more people do not properly prepare for business meetings or interviews. In just a few minutes, you can go from good to great by reminding yourself that it's not all about you. Before any business meeting, identify the following: Who are you going to be interacting with? What does this person value? What keeps this person up at night? How can you help him solve his problem? What is the company culture? Are there any customs or rituals you should be aware of? What do you know about the person you're meeting with? What are his hobbies and passions? Then, prepare some questions that demonstrate that you understand the situation and have thought about the other person. Dress appropriately. If it's a job interview, demonstrate how you will be the solution to whatever problems ail your future boss.

**Say the person's name.** Earlier, I wrote that "you" just might be the most irresistible word in the English language. The truth of the matter is that the most irresistible word in the English language is unique to each individual. It's as unique as their first name. I am an absolute sucker for anybody who uses my name after first meeting me. You will charm me, and I will adore you because, after all, you've just brought up me, the subject that I find far more interesting than any other subject in the world. If you are unsure whether to call me Tasha or Mrs. Space, just use the same name that I used when I introduced myself. If no one has introduced us, call me Mrs. Space, and I will at once instruct you to call me Tasha. But it's better to be safe, as some people are awfully

skills you apply to patient care.

**TC: During your term as APhA-ASP president, did you see a shift in the level of professionalism practiced by students?**

**Traynor:** I think a shift in the level of professionalism practiced by students was reflected in increased membership and active involvement. With more students being involved in activities and chapters continuing to expand and improve their activities, professionalism will only continue to advance. I hope that increased awareness of what professionalism is and how important professional development is continues. Furthermore, I hope that professionalism extends past one's time as a student to time as a practitioner, where your active involvement is needed.

prickly about this sort of thing, and you should be respectful of their wishes.

**Watch the boss.** If you are in a situation, and you are not sure what the appropriate behavior is, watch the guy in charge. If he eats his French fries with his fingers, take this as permission to do the same. If he cuts his French fries with a knife and fork, it would be safest to follow suit. If he likes mayo on his fries, imagine that you can't think of eating French fries any other way.

**Deliver a little something extra.** Sometimes, when my husband stops for gas, he will surprise me with a \$2 scratch ticket. I love scratch tickets. Setting aside the fact that I am always covered in gray shavings, the real value of his \$2 gesture lies in how good he makes me feel. Everybody loves to be delighted, and the person who delights you is the person you will feel emotionally connected to. It does not take much—a handwritten note, doing something without being asked, or delivering more than you promised. In some cases, all it takes is a smile.

## Nobody's perfect

It's impossible to always behave in a way that everyone will believe to be appropriate. That's because no two people are alike, and what one person values, another person may find contemptuous. But if you follow the tips outlined in this article, you will be sure to make a positive impression on others that will be much more important in advancing your career than knowing what fork to use ever could be.

I respect my former boss. She is a wonderful woman who cares deeply about the people around her, and I believe she just wanted me to be the best I could be. Perhaps my wandering fork was so offensive to another individual that he or she felt compelled to report my despicable conduct. However, I still believe that my boss's behavior was inappropriate. I think the way she handled the situation was bad business etiquette, as she left me with a negative impression, which can happen at any moment.

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