

Making the most of business cocktails and dinners, without making an ass out of yourself

BY LANA CASTLEMAN, *KIDSCREEN*



Party on... Just mind your manners

Formal meetings are only one facet of conducting business at major markets like MIPCOM. People in this industry are an amicable, if not gregarious, bunch and many find themselves on the receiving end of a seemingly endless succession of invitations to social events during the month of October. However, much depends on drinks and dinner. For as fun and un-businesslike as cocktail parties and group dinners often seem, they play an integral part in building relationships that might just help you seal your next big deal. Committing social gaffes of the ‘I can’t believe how rude that was’ variety may break a deal before you’ve even had the chance to get one on the table. You have to bring your A-game. So with that in mind, we’ve turned to a few etiquette experts and market veterans to divulge their

strategies for making it through cocktails and dinners with your dignity and business intact.

LICENSE TO EAT, REVOKED

The number one purpose of cocktail parties is to provide a networking opportunity. So upon entering one, it’s no time to be Shrimpy McEats-A-Lot. You’re there to meet new people, not hang out at the hors d’oeuvre table, scarfing back seafood, quaffing wine and gossiping with someone you already know. “Walk into the party tall,” says Adeodata Czink, president of Toronto’s 20-year-old etiquette firm The Business of Manners. Czink adds, “Keep what you want to get out of it, and who you’re there to meet, top of mind.”

Once in the door, gladly don the name tag that awaits you and then make your arrival known

to the organizer. At this point, you can also ask the host to make some introductions for you, suggests Lew Bayer, partner at Winnipeg-based The Civility Group, which offers courses on business etiquette such as ‘How not to be a Cocktail Weenie.’ Let the host know the kinds of industry folk you’re looking to meet, which should help you ease into the practice of making cold introductions on your own.

Whatever you do, don’t get sidetracked by the free food and booze. While that deep-red cherry tomato appetizer may seem deliciously innocent, Czink says “it’s a monster” waiting to attack your clothes and leave an embarrassing stain in its wake. Sure, you can eat – after all there’s all that food floating around on servers’ trays – but the etiquette expert says you should limit yourself to one-bite appies, more than that and you’ll be stuck with a gob full of food at an inopportune time. Furthermore, avoid awkward snacks like meat on a stick; they’re more than a mouthful, and you’re usually left wandering aimlessly for what seems like hours wielding what has now become a weapon in a crowded room – the naked, pointy stick. Phyllo-filled treats are also a no-go, as anyone who’s worked the room covered in flaky pastry will attest.

On the drink side, Czink says it’s polite to take a glass of vino, but put a limit on consumption. She notes for women, in particular, there’s a

AND AFTER DINNER?

Lew Bayer, partner at The Civility Group, weighs in on after-dinner etiquette:

- ▶ Always extend an exit handshake.
- ▶ Remember to thank the host (at someone’s home, offer to help clean up) before you leave and then consider sending a hand written card as well.
- ▶ If you suggested you’d set up a meeting, or pass on a name, or do something – do it!
- ▶ Reciprocate – extend an invitation to the host when you plan your next function.

All illustrations graciously provided by Jim Benton. For more Benton lunacy, please visit www.jimbenton.com

double standard. "If a woman gets obviously drunk, she can never recover her reputation." And when you have the glass in hand, opt for stemware (it doesn't tend to get your hands wet with condensation), keep it in your left hand and leave the right free for handshakes and business card presentation.

COME HERE OFTEN?

As for striking up a conversation, it's best to approach people who seem to be between meetings. Barging into a chatty clatch isn't a good idea, and once you've made your move, leading with "Do you come here often, big boy?" is even worse. The simpler the opening line, the better. Czink says you need not utter anything more elaborate than "Hello, I don't believe we've met. My name is..." And at that point, she says, you immediately have several possible topics to carry the conversation, including your connection to the host, your purpose for being at the party, and the general ambience of the room. Additionally, says Bayer, you should be ready to state your name, title, company and give a short description of what you do.

During the chat, it's important to focus on the other person and make eye contact. For you Crackberry addicts out there, it means putting your PDA and/or cell phone to sleep. Answering a call or eyeing incoming email at this juncture is "like blowing your nose in front of the person – extremely rude," says Bayer.

That initial 30- to 45-second intro should be enough to determine whether or not you've made a connection, and the conversation doesn't have to be needlessly drawn out. To extricate yourself, don't lie and say you have to go to the bathroom – just offer your hand to shake and say "It was a pleasure to meet you." At this point, you can also give the person your card. Be sure to present it so the print is right-side up for the receiver. More often than not, you'll get one in return, but if the gesture isn't reciprocated just carry on to the next person. And as the party winds down, be sure to scout out the host and thank them for inviting you. ▶ 026



Polite interaction with program buyers

For proof that social etiquette is a crucial part of the deal, look no further than buyer-seller interaction. One slip-up with a buyer can put a producer in his or her bad books permanently. Theresa Plummer-Andrews, former CBBC head of acquisitions and coproductions who has since set up consultancy firm Plum Trees TV, has certainly heard tell of scores of gaffes committed during her more than two decades at market. Here she shares some big do's and don'ts when it comes to dealing with buyers in social situations:

- ▶ At cocktail parties, don't latch on to a buyer and take up all their time. By all means, introduce yourself and chat, but keep it short. Remember, the buyer wants to be polite to the party's host and talk to as many people as possible.
- ▶ Don't badger a buyer for a meeting only to have them greeted by an empty stand because you left the market early. "This happens on more occasions than you would imagine," notes Plummer-Andrews, "and there is nothing more that can be done to ensure you never get a meeting with that buyer again."
- ▶ Judge your pitch. If it's the last day of the market, the buyer has probably taken over 100 meetings within the space of five days. She recalls one pitch when: "It was the buyer's last meeting of the market. The producers bounced up to the stand and proceeded to launch into a 30-minute, non-stop verbal pitch, outlining every character, every storyline, every bit of background down to when their kids were born and what their wives names were... At the end of the meeting, the buyer's eyes were glazed over and she couldn't speak. The buyer's colleague stepped in and said 'I've just seen her brain fall out onto the table.'"
- ▶ Be concise, short, sharp and to the point and you will be forever appreciated.
- ▶ Think twice about making derogatory remarks about a buyer during the course of a party. Plummer-Andrews tells of one incident where a

producer launched into a screech about a buyer who had "foisted him onto some underling," calling for her resignation. The buyer in question stood right behind the producer. She tapped him on the shoulder and curtly asked if he had anything else he wanted to complain about. And yes, the "underling" is now the head buyer.

- ▶ Be wary of the hours between 5:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. "People are still in meetings and don't appreciate you falling across their table reeking of vasts vats of rosé wine, asking if they're in a meeting – then totally ignoring the fact that they are by continually babbling on."
- ▶ Don't pitch in a bathroom. EVER. Even after explaining that it wasn't the time or place and retreating to the bathroom stall, Plummer-Andrews was met with the sight of the pitch package being shoved under the door at her feet by an overzealous sales person. Suffice it to say, that package never made it further than the garbage bin.
- ▶ "Don't talk business all night long. Everyone needs a break and although a buyer would expect to speak about whatever it is you have to talk about, don't go on and on about it all night long. The buyer will just give in, drink vast vats of wine and not remember anything in the morning."
- ▶ Be wary of bringing the uninvited guest to dinner. "Many producers (and buyers) have turned up at restaurants with an entourage only to find there is no room at the inn and that everybody is embarrassed. If you want to take someone else along, check first."
- ▶ If you're going to be late for dinner with one buyer because you're wooing another, have the common courtesy to cancel the meeting in advance. Don't show up an hour or more late and say, "We had another meeting and didn't think to call the restaurant." You'll likely not work with them again. Says Plummer-Andrews, "Manners cost nothing... And to say to someone that another meeting was more important is the kiss of death." LC

◀ 025 manners

WHAT'S FOR SUPPER?

Many of the same rules apply to business dinners, but as fits the more formal and longer-lasting event, dress, behavior and conversation should get turned up a notch. Again, the meal is about building relationships and dealing with business, while the food served is secondary.

If you have any dietary issues, be sure to inform the host well in advance of the meal. Don't, under any circumstances, complain of your ailments at the table, says Bayer. Additionally, don't view the invite as an opportunity to gorge yourself.

Once seated, take cues from the host. Usually, Bayer says, the host will convey their spending limit in subtle ways. For example, they may recommend a few dishes from the restaurant's menu as excellent, and this should give you an idea of what they are prepared to spend on the meal. If the host says "everything is fantastic," you're being given carte blanche, but Bayer recommends refraining from ordering the most expensive item on the menu; it just makes you look greedy.

Ordering food that you intend to save for a doggy bag also comes off badly. In fact doggy bags/leftovers are to be avoided altogether. "I've known people to even ask for an extra portion to take home for their spouse," says Bayer. "It's rude to order food that you will not eat in the company of the host and to take advantage of someone else's hospitality."

Finally, mind your manners, just as your mother told you. It's not necessary to be schooled in the arcane arts of dining, but you have to make an effort. That means no taking calls during dinner and no slurping, burping, chewing loudly or with your mouth open and shoveling food into your cake hole. Dining pace should be measured and you should attempt to match that of your companions.

IN GOOD COMPANY

Certainly, socializing is the centerpiece of the evening. Neil Court, long-time MIP attendee and partner at Toronto's Decode Entertainment, likes to bring like-minded people from different companies together at the dinner table, especially program buyers. "They always want to meet people who buy similar shows, and it makes for a more interesting and relaxed evening," he says.

Moreover, adds Court, the host must make an effort not to overwhelm guests with too many reps from their own company. "I was invited to a dinner once with seven people from the host's company, and one from the client's; it's intimidating," he says. "A ratio of two to one is a good rule, especially when you're dealing with people new to the business."

And you need to keep the business talk to a minimum as no one wants to be at the sleepy end of the table at a three-hour dinner. Says Court, "Be prepared to talk about something other than shop." And if you're dining with an international crowd, make an effort to come to the dinner knowing something about the other countries represented at the table. "It makes you a hell of a lot more interesting," he explains, "and it's flattering to your guests."

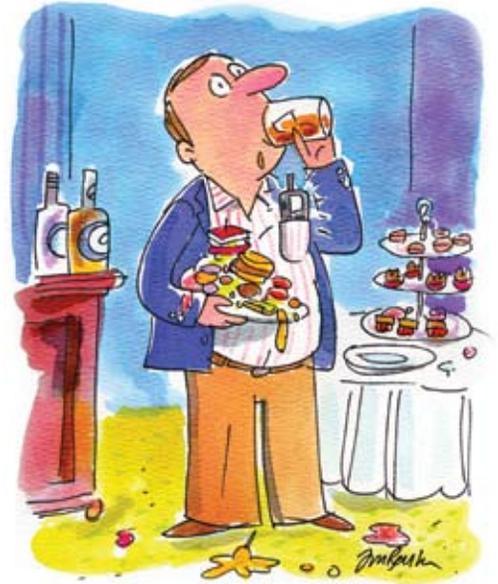
Both Bayer and Czink suggest boning up on current events so you're able to start conversations and ask questions to keep them moving, and having a small repertoire of clean, yet humorous, anecdotes at the ready to fill any lulls. Subjects to be avoided at all costs, especially with new business acquaintances, include your sex life, partisan politics and religion. And Czink cautions that too many references to extended family, the kids or grandchildren "can become tedious."

CHECK, PLEASE!

So you've had a great evening, everyone's happy, relaxed and full – how to deal with that pink elephant in the room: the check? As a rule, the person whose issues the invitations pays. Czink says the best thing to do is arrange pre-payment or at least make sure the bill never shows up at the table. If it's a group dinner where people are picking up their own portion of the tab, be sure to pitch in your fair share – and that includes an allowance for the tip.

Finally, to insure you leave the meal with your reputation intact be sure to thank the host and extend handshakes to the others at the table. Also, if you suggested setting up a meeting, passing on a name or said you would send some subsequent information during the course of the evening, says Bayer, make sure you deliver on your promises.

Now go out and get those pre-market haircuts and manicures to complement the etiquette tune up, you've got parties to attend and new crowds to woo.



THE WINING PART OF DINING

When it comes to business dinners, ordering the right wine can be tricky. But etiquette expert Lew Bayer, partner at The Civility Group, says there are a few simple guidelines you can follow to make the process as smooth as a good bottle of rosé:

- It's rude to pretend you know more than you do about wine. If you're uncomfortable ordering, tasting or pouring, ask your wait person to help you.
- Don't order the most expensive bottle on the menu. Snobbery isn't very becoming to anyone.
- If you are the designated taster, when the wine arrives, all you need do is check the bottle to confirm it's what was ordered, check the poured wine for pieces of cork or floaters, smell the wine (even uneducated noses can sniff out spoiled grapes), then take a small sip for flavor. If it doesn't taste immediately disagreeable, let the wait staff commence pouring and leave others to discuss its undertones of tobacco, cherries, wet dog and what have you.
- If you are pouring, serve your guests first, pour a half glass at a time, and try not to let the bottle touch the glass whilst doing so. LC ■