Interview Etiquette
Confidence in Business Meetings and Meals

by Callista Gould

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A look at business etiquette basics and rules for interviews and other business meetings.

The great thing about an interview, it is the one time you can tell people how wonderful you are and they are actually willing to listen.

First, we will look at business etiquette basics in a regular interview, and then cover the additional rules for interview meals. The information here is relevant for any business meeting, whether you are pitching a product or plan, dining with other professionals, attending a banquet, or entertaining any of your organization’s stakeholders.

What is etiquette? Etiquette is not a bunch of stuffy rules designed to confine. Etiquette is about being aware of the people around you and attentive to their needs. The number one rule of etiquette is to break any rule of etiquette in order to make the people around you feel comfortable.
Your Interview Begins at the Front Door
Your interview does not begin when you meet the interviewer; it begins at the front door. Be convivial and make eye contact with everyone you meet on the way in and out—this includes security personnel, receptionists, or administrative professionals. These gatekeepers frequently have input on the hiring decisions. They are part of your interview process.

Turn your cell phone off, not on vibrate. If it goes off in an interview, you will seem unfocused and distracted. Avoid texting and phone conversations while in a waiting room.

Stand up to greet anyone you meet in business, move forward and shake hands confidently. If you are introduced to someone else who enters the room, stand up to greet that person.

The rules of social etiquette dictate that a man should stand when introduced to a woman. But the rules of business etiquette are gender neutral. So who stands for an introduction? Men and women.

Here are other business etiquette examples:

• Who extends a hand first in an introduction? Either a woman or a man.
• Who holds the door open? The first person who gets to the door.
• Who exits the elevator first? The person closest to the door.

If you are shown into a room to meet the interviewer, wait for the interviewer to tell you where to sit. Remain standing until the interviewer sits.

Your Handshake Speaks
A vice president of human resources for a Fortune 500 company told me the handshake is the most important part of the interview and the area where most people fail. A handshake that is too weak, the “wet fish” or “fingers” handshake, makes one seem insecure or not a decision-maker. Too crushing makes one seem overbearing or angry.

Give a firm handshake. Your palm fits in the other person’s palm. Grasp the hand for three to four seconds. Your handshake speaks. It should say, “I’m confident, I’m enthusiastic, and I’m darn glad to meet you.”

Men should shake a woman’s hand as firmly as a man’s hand. To give a woman a lesser handshake is to not treat her as an equal in business.

Instead of, “It’s nice to meet you,” say, “How do you do, (name)?” This is a more polished response to an introduction. Repeating the person’s name back impresses that person and helps you with name recall.

During the interview, sit on the edge of the chair and lean forward slightly to let the interviewer know you are attentive.

Ask the interviewer questions based on your research of the organization. Don’t be afraid to ask the interviewer about his/her experience with the organization:

“How long have you been with the organization?”

“What do you like best about working for this organization?”

“How did you get started in this business?”

Close with an expression of why you think your skills are a good fit for the position and the organization. Thank the interviewer for his/her time and shake hands before leaving.

Follow Through
Send both an e-mail and postal mail thank you note. The e-mail thank you is immediate—in case the interviewer is making a quick decision. The postal mail thank you note leaves a lasting impression long after the e-mail has been deleted. If you are interviewed by a panel of interviewers, send individual notes to each one.

This kind of follow through accomplishes three things:

1. It shows you put effort into what you do and showcases your writing skills. Lack of writing skills are a major issue in hiring these days.
2. It helps you establish a deeper connection—a valuable jump-start if you do get the job.
3. It demonstrates how you will communicate with co-workers, clients and other stakeholders, if you are hired.
The Interview Meal
What happens when food is thrown into the mix? Interview meals sometimes throw off the most confident of candidates. “Which fork do I pick up?” “When can I begin eating?”

How you behave at the restaurant signals to the interviewer what type of manager or employee you will be in the workplace. Here are a few ideas on how to make the best impression.

Follow your interviewer’s lead. Place your napkin in your lap and begin eating when the interviewer does.

No matter how many pieces of silverware on the table, start with the utensils on the outside and work your way in toward the plate. The utensils above the plate are for dessert.

In a business meal, the host (the interviewer, in this case) orders second. As the interviewee, you order first. What should you order?

- **Something moderately priced**: to order something more expensive gives the impression you will run up the expense account and burn through the organization’s resources.
- **Something neat**: don’t order a long stringy pasta like spaghetti, a messy sandwich like a French dip, or anything that requires a pile of napkins like barbecued ribs.
- **Something familiar**: if you have never tried shark or eel, don’t do it in an interview. If you have no idea what to order, ask your interviewer for suggestions.

Avoid ordering salad dressing and other items “on the side.” This makes you seem high maintenance. If your diet requires dressing on the side, your diet resumes after the interview.

Try to keep pace with your interviewer. If you finish too far ahead, your interviewer might think you rush things. Too far behind seems like you waste time. Sometimes, this will be a challenge. I used to eat lunch with a CEO from New York, who ate so fast, I felt like I was in one of those hotdog eating contests. Don’t worry if you only make it halfway through your meal—remember, you are there to do business first and eat second. Do not request a doggie bag in business, no matter how much food is left over or how much your dog will like it.

Don’t blow on your hot soup or place ice from your beverage in it to cool it. Wait till it cools. This shows patience.

Taste your food before seasoning it. When you use the salt on food before tasting it, you seem like someone impulsive who does not think things through.
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Do not mix food on your plate into pile of hash. You may love having your entree, potatoes, gravy, and vegetables combined into one heap of deliciousness, but in an interview, it makes you look messy and unorganized. Similarly, do not smother food with ketchup or steak sauce. This gives the impression you do not have good judgment, or taste.

Unless it is so dangerously undercooked, that it is crawling off your plate, try not to send things back. Again, this looks high maintenance and creates an uncomfortable distraction in your interview conversation.

Kill the wait staff with kindness. How you treat them is a reflection of how you will treat others in the workplace. Make eye contact and say, “Please” when you order and “Thank you” when it arrives.

Some people say never order alcohol in an interview. I think if your interviewer is ordering an alcoholic drink, have one if you like, just don’t join an interviewer consuming multiple alcoholic beverages.

Certainly, don’t order alcohol if your interviewer is not. If you abstain from alcohol, there are plenty of non-alcohol beverages available. It’s better to keep a clear head in business.

As with any interview, follow up with a letter to your interviewers, thanking them for the lunch or dinner, as well as re-emphasizing some of your good qualities and continued interest in working for their organization.

Revisit the Number One Rule
When you are not sure what to do, revisit the number one rule: “How do I make the people around me more comfortable?”

In an interview, be confident in yourself and in your skills. When you follow the rules of business etiquette, you don’t have to worry about which fork to pick up, so you can concentrate on the business at hand. em