



TALKING BUSINESS OVER LUNCH

By Suzanne Bates

In business, you can never be afraid to “break bread” with people – colleagues, clients, or any other potential collaborators. The idea of a business lunch can bring on anxiety, but business meals are actually a wonderful and effective way to do business. Over a meal, you can relax, really get to know people by moving from business to social topics, and, ultimately, build relationships and create positive experiences that can become lasting memories.

Business meals are also a great way to take the measure of a person. For example, you wouldn't want to hire someone without first having a meal with them, especially if they will have external responsibility or a leadership role.

Over a meal, you can truly learn a lot about how someone handles themselves. It is important for a person to know dinner and social etiquette if they are to represent you and your company.

I have meals in my office and with colleagues frequently. Here are a few tips that always help me to feel comfortable doing business over a meal:

- **Choose where you dine carefully.** This sends a loud and clear signal about you. If convenience is important to your guest, choose the nicest business lunch restaurant in your area. If you want to impress, go out of your way to choose an upscale, trendy, or interesting place. You should scout the location out or dine there before so that you know it's conducive to doing business. Too quiet, and you'll have to whisper about business; too loud, and you'll have to shout.
- **When you make your reservation, be sure that you let them know it's a business lunch.** This way, the restaurant can prepare to place you in the appropriate area and there is a better chance of having a mistake-free encounter with a client.
- **Plan ahead and be sure that you have reserved enough time to be ready when your guest arrives.** Always arrive at the restaurant before your guest to secure your table. Seating matters, so pick a great spot with the fewest possible distractions – you don't want to get stuck near the kitchen door. When your guest gets there, suggest they sit in the best seat at the table.



- **Whether dining at a restaurant or in your office, always take charge as the host.** Provide a menu, the proper setting, drinks, a comfortable place to sit, etc.
- **It goes without saying that most people do not drink at lunch.** The era of the three martini lunch is long past. Having said that, if your guest wants to have a drink at lunch, by all means make them feel comfortable and then make your own decision about whether you want to partake.
- **Eating is secondary!** Remember that the main purpose of a business lunch is to interact with an important contact, not necessarily to explore a daring new recipe you've been dying to sample. Also, only order "peripheral" menu items, appetizers or dessert, if one or more of your guests does so. If you're the guest, also order these courses only if others appear interested as well.
- **You can follow your diet, just do so discreetly.** If you're following a special diet to lose weight or for specific health reasons, don't subject your guest to lengthy explanations. Instead, call the restaurant ahead of time and have the entrees explained to you.
- **Plan around foods that are difficult to eat.** I always order the easiest thing to eat on the menu, even if it's not what I am particularly craving at that moment. Things like corn on the cob, big sandwiches, and ribs are obviously out, but even something as simple as a salad can be tricky, so choose wisely to avoid spills later.
- **Your job as the host is to guide the conversation...start with social topics and then move to business.** Lunch usually affords you a little more time than breakfast for pleasantries. Also, dinner has a different connotation than lunch, and many people take offense to doing business over dinner, so be sure you understand the expectations for the meal beforehand.
- **Spend time getting to know people.** I have found that you attract people to you, and they want to do business with you, when you appear unhurried and are genuinely interested in getting to know them as people. My financial advisor is a master at this. We always get our business completed and spend plenty of time reviewing my portfolio, but I walk away feeling it was mostly a pleasant conversation with a friend.



- **If you are the host you always pay the bill.** Whether in your office or a restaurant, never accept money from your guest under any circumstance.

To better learn the rules of dining etiquette, there are plenty of good books out there such as Business Etiquette by Ann Marie Sabath or Letitia Baldrige's New Complete Guide to Executive Manners. You'll be able to feel more comfortable if you know which bread plate is yours and which fork is for dessert. Also, know how to handle a napkin. And it may sound like a no-brainer, but resist the temptation to speak with food in your mouth. Always remember that guests order first!

Fair or not, people make all kinds of assumptions about your professionalism based on how you conduct yourself at lunch. Many people will make a final decision about doing business with you or hiring you after sharing a meal. So next time a client invites you to meal, don't miss the opportunity to show them that you know how to confidently navigate the "working lunch."