



25 Ways to Navigate the Business Meal

At some point in your business career, you will probably be sharing a meal with clients, prospective clients, others within your own organization, or even a potential employer.

If you have already experienced a business meal, you probably realized that there is more to work-related dining than just common sense, although good judgment plays an important part.

You *can* learn to navigate the business meal smoothly. Let the following guide you through the process.

Know your company policy

Many companies encourage their employees to take clients or customers out for meals. But before you do any inviting, it's best to check and find out what the policy is at your company. Do only top clients get taken out? Do you have an expense account that pays for business meals, or are you expected to pay? Are others at your level expected or encouraged to socialize out of the office with clients? Once the policy is determined, you can proceed with the next step.

Breakfast, lunch or dinner. Which should you choose?

Here's where some common sense comes into play. If your client has evening obligations, you will probably be safer with a breakfast or lunch arrangement -- with lunch being the most common choice. Many commuters eat their breakfasts in the car or on a train, and would prefer not starting their work day earlier than necessary. The power breakfast, however, can be a good time for socializing with business contacts. Make sure that any invitation you extend be a strictly business one. Don't make your client or customer uncomfortable or have to wonder what your motives might be.

Extending the invitation

You've decided to ask your client out for a business meal. It's best to call, instead of extending the invitation at the end of a meeting when others may be in earshot. If possible, give at least a week's notice. Offer your guest some alternative dates. Find out if there is anything he or she does not, or can not, eat, or if there is a food preference.

Selecting a restaurant

This is not the time to be experimenting with that out-of-the way, hole-in-the-wall that your friend told you about. If your guest has expressed a preference, honor it. If he or she has left the choice up to you, do some homework. Find out where others in your company take their clients. Select a place that has well-spaced tables, is friendly to business diners, and is within your price range. Pick someplace reasonably close to your client's office so that you do the traveling. You must be able to afford the most expensive items on the menu, or choose a different restaurant.



Booking a table

When selecting the restaurant, you should ensure that reservations are honored. The business meal is not the time to spend waiting on line for a table. When you call to book the table, specify that you will be meeting with a business associate. If you must change the number of people in your party, or cancel a reservation, let the restaurant know as soon as possible.

Confirming the arrangements

The day before the lunch, call your client to confirm the date and time. This is also an opportunity to give directions to the restaurant and to clarify parking or other travel arrangements. Also, give the phone number of the restaurant in case your guest is running late, or gets lost.

Re-confirming with the restaurant

On the morning of your lunch, call the restaurant to re-confirm reservations and check on seating requests.

Getting to the restaurant early

At least 10 minutes before your guest is scheduled to arrive, get to the restaurant. This is the time to see where your table will be, and to let the maître d' or captain know that you are to receive the check. In some establishments it is possible to give your credit card in advance, so no check comes to the table, and you pay after your guest has departed. If you are the guest, arrive on time.

Meeting your guest

You've arrived early and are waiting in the lobby when your guest arrives. Wait until then to check your coat. If your guest is late, wait 15 minutes and then call his or her office. If you are in danger of losing your table due to this late arrival, be seated, but do not order anything except a beverage until your guest arrives. If the guest is over 30 to 40 minutes late, you can leave (leave your business card with a note), or sit down and order. Consider leaving a tip for the server. It is revenue he will never recoup.

Dining with a group

If you have invited more than one person to lunch, wait until everyone has arrived to be seated. If most of your group is there, it is appropriate to sit at the table and order beverages while waiting for the latecomers. If your guests have not arrived within 20 minutes, give them a call.

Who walks first?

If you are seating yourself, lead the way for your guests. If the maître d' or captain leads, you follow last.



Who sits where?

Give your guest the best seat. If you're entertaining a group, give the top person there the seat to your right. Let the others choose for themselves, unless you have a particular seating plan in mind. If so, you seat everyone. The best seat at the table usually faces into the room. Give that to the guest of honor. If you are with a group, make sure you mix the tables so each of your group is hosting one of the guests.

Drinking -- should you or shouldn't you?

Remember, one of your objectives is to establish a closer relationship with your guest, and make him or her feel comfortable, but not at the price of your own good judgment. Drinking at business meals is generally frowned upon. However, if your guest orders alcohol and you feel comfortable enough, you may have one drink. You do not have to order alcohol even if your guest does; ordering soda, ice tea, etc., is fine. If your guest wants another alcoholic beverage, limit yourself to one and order soft drinks, bottled water, ice tea, etc. Do not let your guest drink alone and feel uncomfortable, but do not encourage him or her to drink to excess. If your guest has declined a drink, don't order anything for yourself except something nonalcoholic, if you want a beverage. Do not delay ordering while waiting for your solo beverage.

It's OK to discuss the menu

This is also a good way to steer the meal away from drinking, if you feel your guest has had enough. Ask the waiter or captain about any specialties. If you have eaten at the restaurant before, share your suggestions with your guest. Help your guest feel comfortable about the price range and the type of meal (hot or cold, full dinner or a la carte). Discussing the menu will help make him or her feel comfortable with choosing. Let your guest order first, unless the person insists that you do. Some people feel more comfortable hearing what their host is ordering before they choose. Don't insist that your guest order first unless he or she wants to. If an appetizer is ordered, you should get one, too. As a host, order at least as expensively, and as many courses as your guest. As a guest, order in the mid price range.

Save finger foods for another situation

Don't order anything messy or drippy, or that you haven't tasted before. That goes for burgers and fries, clams, spaghetti (small-shaped pasta is OK), or anything that might splash on you or your guest. If you have to squeeze a lemon, make sure it's covered by your hand.

Getting down to business

If this meal is going to combine business with socializing, the time to discuss business is after ordering. If a business discussion will take place, try not to strew papers or files over the table. One or two papers, or a single file, should be all that comes out of your briefcase. Keep your briefcase off the table. Keep your voice low, so your conversation is not overheard.



Napkin niceties

The napkin should go on your lap once everyone has been seated. If it is a large napkin, fold it in half. If you leave the table briefly mid meal, the napkin is placed on your chair. At the end of the meal, put your napkin to the left of your plate.

Managing silverware

The word “left” has four letters, so does the word “fork.” The word “right” has five letters, so do the words “knife” and “spoon.” This a great way to remember that the fork is on your left, and the knife and spoon are set to your right. Hold your silverware toward the handle, away from the tines, blade or bowl of the spoon. If you are eating American style (switching the fork to your right hand after cutting), cut two to three pieces at a time. If you are eating Continental style (keeping your fork in your right hand), cut one piece at a time. Put your silverware on the plate while chewing, not on the table, and never wave it in your hand.

Which bread plate is mine?

I'm sure most of us have looked at what we thought was our bread plate only to find our neighbor using it. Here's the rule: Eat to your left, drink to your right. Any food dish to the left is yours, any glass to the right is yours. If your neighbor has accidentally used your bread plate, don't embarrass him or her. Quietly ask the waiter for another.

Offer your guest dessert

If your guest orders something after the main meal, you should, too. If you're watching your weight, stick to fruit or sorbet. If your guest wants coffee, order a beverage as well. If you don't drink coffee, order tea or another soft drink and keep your guest company, even if you only take a few sips. Your objective, as always during this meal, is to keep your guest comfortable.

Table manner tips

Chew with your mouth closed. Cut the food into bite-sized pieces. Bring the food to your mouth, not your mouth to the food. Pass the salt and pepper together. Don't reach for food.

Don't complain about food unless it's really bad

If your meal isn't great, eat it anyway unless there is something very wrong with it. If your guest's meal is bad, ask to have yours kept warm in the kitchen until his or hers is re-served. Keep your cool and deal with any problems with finesse and diplomacy. This will be something your guest remembers long after the meal is finished.

Grooming at the table is verboten

This means putting on lipstick, combing hair, picking teeth, powdering nose, nose blowing, or anything else that should be done in a restroom. If your client doesn't know better, please make sure that you do. Excuse yourself if you are in need of some repair.



Paying the bill -- the right way

If you were able to pre-pay or arrange beforehand for no check to come to the table, escort your client to the door (if appropriate, help him or her on with a coat) and say any goodbyes. Then you can sign your receipt and add the appropriate tip (15-20% of the bill to the waiter, 5% to the captain) without anyone feeling uncomfortable. If you were not able to arrange this, the bill will almost always come to the person who requests it, and in this case that should be you. If your guest offers to pay, simply say, "Today you're the guest of the XYZ Company."

Thank you's

If you are the guest, be sure to write (and send) a thank-you note.

We encourage you to share this BRODY article with your associates! Permission to reprint/use this article is allowed providing, "Copyright 2010 BRODY Professional Development" is cited. If you reprint/use this article, we also ask that a copy be forwarded to BRODY. For related articles contact BRODY at 215-886-1688 or info@brodypro.com.