

charmschool

Where grandmothers, governesses, and Emily Post once pointed the way, a guy can now get lost in the search for civilized life. But even if you weren't to the manners born, you can still learn to navigate etiquette conundrums like cell phones and public bathrooms—and discover one secret social weapon everyone should have on his side.

It's 2002. We're a cacophony of convenience—cell phones, blackberries, pagers—but where are our manners? Currently they are in a conference room at the Warwick Regis Hotel in San Francisco. They are here because this is where Syndi Seid, founder and grande dame of Advanced Etiquette, a modern-day charm school, holds forth on all things prim and proper at a time when many have forgotten and many more never knew. ¶ Do you remember the first time you beheld the power of manners? Before you understood why James Bond always got the girl? Mine came in the principal's office circa tenth grade after some schmuck had stolen the history exam and all the usual suspects were manhandled out of homeroom. For the record, I didn't steal the test, but we all looked at it. Eight guys sitting in that office and all of us sin-guilty, slumped, eyes averted, gum chewing, untucked, unkempt, and withering in the face of forces beyond our control. ¶ All of us except for John R. ¶ John R. would have made Syndi Seid proud. He sat up straight. He kept both his feet flat on the ground. He maintained proper eye contact. When the principal began the grand inquisition, we all copped to it. Not John R. ¶ "No, sir," he said. ¶ We flunked. John got an A. And let me tell you something else that polite young man got—all the way through school—he always got the girl. ¶ Truthfully, I was not an ill-mannered kid. I was like most, unsure and awkward. The instruction I received at home was along the lines of "Hold the damn door for your mother!" So, I held the door for my mother because I was told to hold the door, but I was not told why. I had not learned what John R. had learned—that was manners, properly wielded, are a weapon as powerful as any broadsword.

BY STEVEN KOTLER PHOTOGRAPH BY MARGARET SALMON & DEAN WIAND

WIELDING THIS WEAPON IN THESE MODERN TIMES TAKES A particular dexterity. It's no longer enough to say, "please" and "thank you," keep your elbows off the table, and chew with your mouth closed. Today, there are liberated women, e-mail, voice-mail, and snail-mail correspondence quagmires; automatic doors, soul-brother half-hug handshakes; and a thousand other petty confusions.

In the old days, there were reasons for etiquette. Men entered doors ahead of women to ensure that the room was safe. Cups clanked during toasts so the grogs would mingle, safeguarding against poison. By the Victorian era, manners had become a codified game, and the player identified his social stratum just by knowing which brest pocket sported a square. The early twentieth saw the seams of society stretched by a huge influx of immigrants, new money, and returning soldiers, in 1922, Emily Post answered the call by setting down in print what had once been taught at home. Etiquette became an immediate bestseller, and for a while we were a well-behaved nation, but it didn't last.

"Manners went downhill after the fifties," says Jason Tesauo. He and Phineas Mollod, both throwbacks in their thirties, have co-authored the new compendium *The Modern Gentleman: A Guide to Essential Manners*, Savvy

1

"He was violating the second rule of the two rules for getting on well with people who speak Spanish: give the men tobacco and leave the women alone."—Ernest Hemmingway

& Vice. “There was a small resurgence in the eighties,” continues Tesauro, “but the nineties backside—think grunge—was extreme.” Which has left us sailing turbulent seas here in the early zeros. To steady our ship, char schools are creeping back into vogue, though much of what’s taught is couched as business etiquette. Post herself has become an institute, based in Burlington, Vermont, where you can shell out about four grand for a day’s tutorial in “Creating extraordinary Relationships” or “Benefits to the Bottom Line.” Or \$7,000 for a private lesson with Dorothea Johnson, the founder of our nation’s leading diplomat training camp, the Protocol School of Washington. Or from \$275 into the thousands for a class with Johnson’s prize student: Syndi Seid.

When Sied’s class starts, promptly at nine, any preconceived notions about the kind of person who goes to charm school in these rude times (according to a recent survey done by Public Agenda, a nonprofit research group, eight out of ten Americans think discourtesy and rudeness have become a “serious problem”) go out the window. The students come in all shapes, sizes, colors, whatever—and with as many different reasons for being here.

“I want to get ahead in business and want to make sure my manners never hold me back.”

“I’m in party planning.”

“I was raised in a house where we only ate with chopsticks.”

As for me, I’ve come to believe manners are where to turn after the advantages of youth—high-maintenance haircuts, a familiarity with the darker recesses of rock clubs—lose their luster and edge. They are a way to get over and stay over. “In your thirties,” says Peter Post, heir to Emily’s throne, “standing up when a lady arrives at the table offers as much power as funky style did in your twenties.”

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“Good manners have much to do with emotions. To make them ring true, one must feel them, not merely exhibit them.”

—Amy Vanderbilt

A COUPLE OF YEARS BACK, I WAS BUYING BEER AT A 7-ELEVEN. AS I TOOK MY place in line, the gentleman ahead of me gave me a look. Admittedly, it wasn’t the best part of town, but really, I had as much right to a sixer of cheap swill as the next guy. He turned again. Again I stayed put.

“Man, don’t you have any manners?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“You want to come to this neighborhood? Then don’t stand so damn close.”

When it comes to modern male etiquette, the conundrum is usually about personal space. Men spend their twenties staking out territory and their thirties defending it. It’s not enough to simply respect the king, you’ve got to respect the kingdom as well. Consider, for example, the rest room. All it takes is a few unpleasantly intimate encounters to convince you to put an empty urinal between you and the next guy, even if it means ducking into a stall to do so. And this is no place for small talk: It’s wise to remember that there are very few things worth talking about with your dick in your hand and fewer that should be said in public.

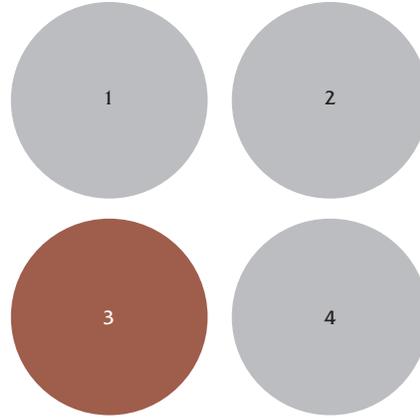
The subject of money is another personal-space violation. Seid believes money should be discussed only in business situations. so no matter how much you’re dying to know the monthly dues on your pal’s new duplex or how well Microsoft treats its employees, don’t ask. And if you need to parry the inevitable query, it’s best to opt for an obfuscating out, along the lines of “I make slightly less than the Sultan of Brunei spends on hair gel.” When it comes to men and the borrowed dollar, take a page from Mark Twain: “The holy passion of friendship is of so sweet and steady and loyal and enduring a nature that it will last through a whole lifetime, if not asked for money.”

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{ “Manners are love in a cool climate—Quentin Crisp }

CIVILIZED LIVING BRINGS UP ALL SORTS OF SITUATIONS—HOSTING, GUESTING, SENDING THANKS—WHERE AN INVESTMENT IN GOOD MANNERS CAN BRING A FOURFOLD RETURN. IT’S AMAZING HOW FAR YOU CAN SET YOURSELF FROM THE RABBLE WITH A FEW DEPOSITS: IF YOU GO TO A PARTY, BRING WINE; IF YOU HAVE TO LEAVE EARLY, APOLOGIZE AND SEND A FOLLOW-UP NOTE; IF YOU’RE A WEEKEND GUEST, TREAT YOUR HOST TO A MEAL; IF YOU’RE HABITUALLY LATE, KNOW THAT THE GROUND YOU ARE LOSING MAY BE MEASURED IN MERE MILLIMETERS, BUT YOU’RE LOSING IT JUST THE SAME. ONE GOODWILL GENERATOR TO KEEP AT HAND IS THE ART OF WRITTEN CORRESPONDENCE, ESPECIALLY WHILE EVERYONE AROUND YOU CUTS CORNERS BY LEAVING VOICE-MAIL MESSAGES AND MISSPELLED E-MAIL JOTTINGS. TRY TAKING THE THANK YOU NOTE—A CLASSIC VEHICLE WHOSE LINES, LIKE THE TAIL-FIN CADILLAC’S, HAVE UNIVERSAL APPEAL—FOR A SPIN. IT HAPPENS SO RARELY THESE DAYS THAT THE GAS MILEAGE, YOU WILL FIND, IS VERY GOOD INDEED. ■

This is a reprint from the August 2002 issue of *DETAILS*, the men’s magazine that introduces the styles, sets the trends and breaks the stories that keep readers ahead of the crowd. Ms. Syndi Seid held a seminar at the Warwick Regis Hotel in San Francisco which was attended by the writer of this article.



“A blond in a red dress can do without introductions.”—Rona Jaffe

Women read manners like tea leaves. Be rude in the present, and you may not get a future. So with the dames, do as my father does and open the damn door. This means not bothering with the what-day-should-you-call calculus when you get a girl’s number. “Call the next day,” says Tesauro. “If you bothered to ask for her number, she already knows you like her. You’re not tipping your hand, you’re just offering the illusion of hand-tipping, and that can have quite an impact.

Modernity makes Chivalry tricky. According to Seid, when approaching revolving doors, the woman goes first and the man pushes. Tesauro and Mollod, in a chapter entitled “Prophyletiquette,” state that, “a hosting gentleman offers the basic coital accoutrements for anxiety-free coupling,” which may be a different kind of door altogether, but hold-worthy nonetheless.

Good manners, especially when it comes to women, are about sublimating your desires to the needs of another. So, doors, yes, but if you choose to walk on through, there are other things to consider. The last great flirtation I had started out with me holding doors like a religion. She loved it, called me charming, agreed to move in. Be it familiarity or laziness or a symptom of darker things, a year later I had forgotten my faith. Then she asked me why I wasn’t holding door for her anymore. Damned if I did and damned if I didn’t, and suddenly I wasn’t charming and she wasn’t staying.

The politeness primer handed out to incoming freshmen by Hampton-Sydney College, an all-men’s school in Virginia, opens with a chapter on introductions. Page 5: “A woman is never introduced TO a man unless he is a clergyman, the president, a governor, a mayor, or a foreign head of state.” Maybe we’re not all going to the same parties, but Tesauro and Mollod agree that no etiquette tradition is a sorely missed as the proper introduction. Its purpose is so the host can leave the two guests with something to talk about. This means that it is important to add a bit of color commentary. When people introduce me as “Steven,” I’m left trying to explain who that is and why it matters. “This is Steven—he’s a cosmonaut” at least gives me room to maneuver.

Modern living has altered forms of communication, but there are still rules to follow. Peter Post sees cell phones as the modern equivalent of the wrong fork. He recommends never talking on a cell phone where it can affect another person. If you need to take a call, then take it outside. As far as speakerphones go, unless you’re sitting in a conference room having an actual conference, then no—not ever. Then there are the friends with shitty jobs and too much time for e-mail. A woman I dated for a while didn’t have a job at all, which meant my phone rang every hour on the hour.

“Hi. What are you doing? Are you busy?”

“Yes, I’m working.”

That one ended badly.