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Making money the 'proper' way

Business is booming for etiquette firms

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Silicon Valley may lead the way in jobs and money, but some say it could use training in manners and etiquette.

And those who make their money teaching this once-basic skill are finding business is booming as everyone scrambles to learn their p's and 's. And baby boomers--who once rejected such things--are contributing to the resurgence.

"There is a renaissance going on," said Sue Fox, founder of The Workshoppe in Saratoga. "'People are well-educated, but they want that little bit of edge that goes with etiquette."

Ms. Fox started her business in 1995 after working in sales and marketing at Apple Computer Inc. for 10 years. During her years in the corporate world, she realized many people lacked proper social and dining skills and decided to start a business to teach people etiquette.

She hooked up with former partner, Lindy James, leased a downtown Saratoga space and began teaching courses in grooming and self-esteem to teens and children. She soon noticed that the parents were asking just as many questions as their kids, and realized there was a demand for adult etiquette training.

Ms. Fox put an ad in Metro newspaper for an etiquette lesson at a restaurant in Saratoga and was stunned by the response--40 people signed up for the continental dining experience. Soon after, she started contacting human resource departments and now business is booming.

"It is a sensitive topic, and hard to go to individuals and say, 'Gee, it would be nice if you went to an etiquette course.' However, the norm is to offer it to new employees or as a team builder," Ms. Fox said. Although some people think of manners as snobbery, etiquette rules actually were instituted so people would feel comfortable.

Her workshops can be custom designed, but there are three basic formats:

- The basic dining and social etiquette class is held in a restaurant.
- Boardroom polish includes the proper use of the telephone, small talk, and traveling dos and don'ts.
- Business and social entertaining includes both boardroom polish and dining skills.

Business has grown so much, Ms. Fox's phones are ringing off the hook, she said. In fact, she has experienced major growing pains and recently hired two new consultants. One of them, Paula Burton, will be joining the company in January to coach executives who deal with the media. The other, Lisa Mirza, is director of protocol for the city and county of San Francisco under Mayor Willie Brown.

Mses. Fox and Mursaw currently collaborate on business and social etiquette. Ms. Mursaw stresses the importance of learning the social etiquette before the dining rules.

"You can't sit down to dinner unless you know how to make proper introductions," she said.

The method of introductions varies according to setting. In a social setting, introductions are based on gender and age. However, in a business environment the criteria is rank. So, the person with the highest rank is introduced first, said Syndi Seid, president and founder of Advanced Etiquette.

Ms. Seid started Advanced Etiquette in 1992. She has been doing seminars for Hewlett-Packard Co. since 1993 and has found that corporate clients have been her mainstay.

Her seminars cover business communication skills: how to arrange a meeting, work with a client and network. The business-lunch segment covers table manners and flatware protocol.

Many etiquette professionals mention that table manners are sadly lacking. Such common sense maxims as "don't talk with your mouth full" and "keep your elbows off the table" are still the rule.

Although some rules never change (these are called protocol), manners do alter with our evolving culture. Protocol would refer to the traditional firm handshake and eye contact, while manners would address how to be couth in cyberspace.

Many corporations are turning to seminars instead of mentoring. Even some seasoned executives are not clear about the rules of etiquette and, therefore, younger employees can expect very little guidance from them.

"We want [good etiquette] to become second nature," Ms. Seid said. "If you take the time and energy to learn it once, it is there as a default skill."

Indeed, in almost any situation there is an accepted etiquette.

This is one way a person can set themselves apart from the crowd. She recommends all high school and college students go through training to help them get a job.

For Liz Quinn, a human resource generalist at Adobe Systems Inc., the seminars at The Workshoppe were a real confidence builder. Although Adobe was not a corporate sponsor, many employees have found the seminars helpful.

"It allows you to be prepared for anything," she said of the two seminars she attended. One was a formal dinner and the other a family-style affair, both at restaurants.

At one of the seminars, a gentleman began eating before others, soaked up his meal with bread and practically licked his plate.

"We thought he was a plant," Ms. Quinn said.

The classes are of great benefit to those companies with a sales force, client interaction or even for high-level executives, she said.

At some point in the future, Adobe may offer the classes, she said.

"It is definitely business-related."

After spending 25 years in different Silicon Valley companies, Marion Gellatly, founded Powerful Presence a year ago. After corporate life, she did fashion and image consulting for seven years, before noticing this niche in business etiquette.

"Companies and employees are paying attention and this is a trend," she said.

Our global economy and dealing with other countries and different cultures also has been a factor.

"We have mixed cultures working together in Silicon Valley and foreign companies place a high decree on protocol and manners," Ms. Gellatly said. Customers have a choice of which company they will do business with and if a client makes them feel good, then they will go with them. And that is a big point with manners, it is geared toward making things more pleasant.

By learning the rudimentary skills of manners, employees can help build their career. Little things make a big difference, for example failing to stand when someone greets you, a limp handshakes or not asking questions can make a poor impression.

"It only takes 15 seconds to make an impression and it takes the rest of your life to undo it," Ms. Gellatly said.