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**CEO, Ogilvy & Mather  
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# Mind Your Manners

A GROWING NUMBER OF CHINESE EXECUTIVES ARE ENGAGING ETIQUETTE EXPERT SYNDI SEID TO TEACH THEM WHICH FORK TO USE by JANINE COUGHLIN

**T**he Chinese have always put a high value on etiquette and politeness. In fact one of Confucius' *Analects* offers up what is often known as The Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

That rule matches pretty closely with Chinese-American Syndi Seid's definition of etiquette. "Basic etiquette is the common courtesies that you display to other people," she says. "'Please' and 'thank you', it goes everywhere."

But in our increasingly globalized world, it takes more than just learning 'please' and 'thank' you in a few different languages to make a good impression when meeting clients or colleagues from offices in another country. And if Westerners often feel perplexed when confronted by a large place setting with multiple forks, knives and spoons, as one often finds when seated at a formal dinner, imagine what that is like for someone used to eating with chopsticks.

This is where etiquette expert Seid comes in. A graduate of both the Protocol School of Washington DC and the Emily Post Institute (considered the Harvard and Stamford of the etiquette business), Seid has been working with US companies such as Hewlett-Packard, Marriott Hotels, and The Mandarin Oriental Hotel,

to train their staff on the basics of business protocol and etiquette. This past year the San Francisco native decided to bring her practice to China, betting that the country's growing number of business elites doing business with Westerners will find a need for her services.

**"Basic etiquette is the common courtesies that you display to other people."**

— Syndi Seid

## PROPER PROTOCOL

Seid believes that being knowledgeable about business protocol and having good etiquette practices builds self confidence in social situations. "I think etiquette is all about having a better quality of life," she says. "It helps you have a better sense of well-being within yourself. No matter what you do, you feel it when you're not well received."

"It is something that universally is an indicator of your level of education. I don't care how poor you are, how unedu-

cated you are, if you can present yourself appropriately it elevates you."

## UNIVERSAL FAUX PAS

And so far, she is finding that there is not much difference between East and West in terms of what is most often lacking. "Believe it or not, whether it is the US or China, it is a bit of the handshaking," says Seid, when asked what she finds people most need to be schooled in. "You still get men and women who give a little bit of the fingertip hold. The other is still varying degrees of standing for introductions. But if anything, one of the worst I think is when it comes to table manners and most people don't realize that they should wait to be served before they start digging in." She adds, "I have seen very high ranking executives who, once they get the meal, they start eating. Who cares about anyone else?"

In fact caring about others is the key to good etiquette. "Laws come into effect when etiquette fails," says Seid, quoting from Judith Martin, an American etiquette expert well known by her moniker, Miss Manners. "In the US they are trying to pass a law to ban mobile phones in movie theaters – why do you have to have a law for that?"

Perhaps further evidence that there's

not much difference in etiquette shortcomings between East and West, here in China, the Association of Accredited Advertising Agencies of China (China 4A) is creating a CSR campaign this year for Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou to promote mobile phone etiquette.

"Actually the real true word is civility," says Seid. "I'm very into now trying to develop that word in all I do. That's the word that says it all. It's how you treat other people in all aspects of life."

#### MANNERS 101

Seid's seminars offer a full day of lessons on a wide range of international business and social etiquette practices: professional image, email and mobile phone etiquette, good first impressions, proper introductions and handshakes. They also include sitting through a three-course "tutorial" lunch — always a soup, main course and dessert — where she teaches toasting practices, proper napkin usage, passing food, and of course which fork is yours and when you should use it.

She also teaches children's etiquette classes, which she says offer similar con-

tent. "For adults, it's corporate events; board meetings, black tie fundraisers. For kids, it's parties," she says, adding that the proper conduct is basically the same for all.

### "The world was my oyster, but I used the wrong fork."

— Oscar Wilde

For now, Seid is conducting her Chinese mainland seminars in English. She is not fluent in Chinese and is afraid that some key points might get lost in translation if she had an interpreter doing simultaneous translation, given that English and Chinese don't exactly translate and there are cultural nuances to some etiquette practices.

#### POLISHING UP

Seid also offers private tutorials. She says one of her clients, The Mandarin Oriental Hotel in San Francisco, hired her to help a popular staff member who had

worked in room service for three years and wanted to be able to one day work as a hostess in their main dining room.

"She didn't have the polish," Seid recalls. "She didn't have the right appearance or the right way of talking. So they hired me to work with her to build her self-confidence." Seid says the employee did manage to achieve her goal.

She says she often hears from hiring managers that they chose a particular candidate because they seemed "nicer".

"Maybe it was something simple like when you walked in for the interview instead of just dropping down into the first chair you saw you asked the interviewer, 'would you like me to sit here?' It's that courtesy," she says. "Those are the things that light me up."

"Etiquette is something that is going to make you feel better about yourself, and open doors for you that you never would have thought of," says Seid. Or at least will keep you from avoiding the fate of Oscar Wilde, who Seid quotes in one of her brochures as saying, "The world was my oyster, but I used the wrong fork." ■