

# *Etiquette tips*

*for the not-ready-for-prime-time geek.*

BY TIA O'BRIEN

"Men, avoid putting business cards in that hip pocket. Sitting on a business card is like sitting on your customer's face!" These are the stern words of Syndi Seid, the etiquette trainer hired by Network Equipment Technologies (NET) Inc. to whip 20 of its marketing and engineering managers into shape.

In unison, several male butts shift self-consciously in their seats.

Seid is just one hour into her all-day etiquette

ILLUSTRATION BY ROB BARBER









marathon. The Fremont, Calif.-based international network equipment supplier is paying her to transform these geeks into worldly Silicon Valley emissaries. "Class, how to get it and how to use it" reads the heading on Seid's business stationery. And, in Seid's opinion, Silicon Valley desperately needs an injection of class.

It's not that these NET managers (14 men and six women) are your classic slouching, baggy-shorts-and-sandal-clad nerds, chomping down grease-dripping Whoppers and fries. They've bathed, combed their hair and clothed themselves in variations of unwrinkled khakis and polo shirts. (Not one offending Mac-world freebie T-shirt in sight.) But they do need polishing—at least, that's what their bosses think—especially when it comes to doing business with NET's Asian clients. One serious etiquette infraction—such as sitting on the client's face/business card—could detonate a deal.

The fact is, computer whizzes can no longer hide behind their terminals. Now that Silicon Valley is a crucial engine powering the U.S. economy, geeks who previously never had to leave their cubicles (let alone Sunnyvale, Calif.) are expected to conduct global business with all the aplomb of Apple Computer Inc.'s Steve Jobs when he's not throwing a tantrum. The

for her debutante ball, some companies are hiring image makers and etiquette trainers to ready their finger-licking, T-shirt-clad workforce to go out and cut deals.

With the Valley's reputation on the line, UPSIDE decided to do its part. Thus, I found myself suddenly thrust into a world rife with looming faux pas. During Seid's epic etiquette course, I was tutored on the risks inherent in every business day: the hazards of a limp handshake, the negative energy stirred up from passing the salt, the reason you must stand 36 inches from the Japanese, food that makes you look ugly.

**B**ut good manners are only half the battle. Getting dressed represents another frontier. For this undertaking, I traveled to computer mecca Fry's Electronics, where a Valley image maker critiqued the parade of "fashion" passing before her in the parking lot. As she eyed yet another poorly dressed specimen, she sighed and said, "To be an image maker in Silicon Valley is the ultimate challenge."

### *Etiquette boot camp*

The 20 NET managers, seated around a horseshoe-shaped cluster of tables, are paying rapt attention to Seid, their mentor.

## *Companies are hiring image makers and etiquette trainers to ready their finger-licking, T-shirt-clad workforce to go out and cut deals.*

bottom line: Social incorrectness can derail even the most brilliant software writer's career.

If you're scratching your armpit in disbelief, let me recount the sorry story of a startup executive who hired a promising engineer for a position that required travel. The geek's credentials were superior. But once he was on the job, the executive began to have doubts about him. The new employee was the quintessential hippie, complete with full beard, long hair and a distinct body odor. And then there were the toenails—long, crusty things curling over the edges of his Birkenstocks.

In the end, appearance and odor nixed this engineer's opportunity to advance: He just wasn't presentable to certain clients. With his career limited, he ultimately quit and returned to a less promising in-house programming job that kept him hidden from public view.

In a Valley where the local custom of "dress down" launched a fashion rebellion in corporations nationwide and where power has inverted status symbols—the more casually you dress, the more likely you're the CEO (see "Dressing for tech success," page 100)—Siliconers often have a hard time adjusting when they're forced to venture into the world of suits and ties. In much the same way you might prep an awkward teen

The conference room walls are plastered with banners outlining the philosophy of Seid's San Francisco-based Advanced Etiquette classes, including "The world was my oyster, but I used the wrong fork" (Oscar Wilde) and "Good manners are made up of petty sacrifices" (Ralph Waldo Emerson).

Seid, the founder and director of Advanced Etiquette, epitomizes the stylish businesswoman—smartly cut, short black hair, a tailored dark-olive-green suit; and a small purse packed with her emergency etiquette supply kit. She's a certified graduate of The Protocol School of Washington in McLean, Va., the nation's best-known such academy. Past clients include Hewlett-Packard Co., Solectron Corp., Tandem Computers Inc. (a unit of Compaq Computer Corp.) and ABC's Charles Gibson, former co-host of "Good Morning America," who learned how to eat pasta with decorum on camera. She's also a featured expert on the cable-TV show "Party at Home."

It takes Seid eight hours to review all the social land mines in Valley behavior and reboot her subjects. She comes—literally—with a bag of tricks, including the gadget that solves that awkward cocktail party dilemma: How do you juggle a plate of hors d'oeuvres while also sipping a glass of wine? (Answer: Use a



Drink Mate, a glass holder that clips onto your plate. Surely you own one?)

She provides each student with a thick blue binder bearing the title "Sharpening Personal Skills to Succeed in the New Millennium." This step-by-step guide to appropriate conduct includes everything from making introductions to "quick tips on Chinese table manners."

Seid targets the etiquette battlegrounds where most social offenses are committed: business meetings and meals. After drills on "Should a woman stand when being introduced?" (yes, there's no gender in business), "When do I start talking at a business lunch?" (when your host speaks to you) and "What do you do if your handshake is clammy?" (keep reading), we learn how to eat "like a diplomat" during a special luncheon tutorial.

Seid surveys her eager pupils. "You're here because you want to know how to outclass the competition," she says. "It's a very competitive world."

To be competitive, we learn, you must embrace *universal cleanliness*—a cleansed body just isn't enough. Seid whips out a crisp white business card from her carrying case. "You wouldn't go on a sales call dirty and unshowered. This is inconceivable,"

she says with a shudder. "It's just as true for your business cards."

In Japan, which has set the world standard for exchanging business cards, you always present a card with two hands; receive with the right hand—"Never with the left hand in the Middle East! It's unsanitary!"—and never, never write on it in front of the person.

Seid warns that cultural ignoramuses pay a high price. Take, for example, the friendly Silicon Valley CEO who blundered his way through Germany. "He kept greeting executives by their first names as you do in Silicon Valley," says Seid, her voice rising with schoolmarm dismay at the CEO's brashness. "It was a failed trip."

We nod. We don't want to be failures. Seid dims the lights and begins clicking through a series of slides—photographs of executives illustrating the right and wrong ways to do almost everything except breathe. One yahoo is slouching and telling off-color jokes. Another has crossed his legs in

# Dressing for tech success

BY NICHOLAS BAKER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARTHA ANNE BOOTH

One of the biggest problems in the technology world is knowing what to wear. A knowledge of matters technical and a fast hand on the keyboard are all well and good, but if you turn up to a meeting in the wrong outfit, you may as well file for bankruptcy protection on the spot.

Everything sartorial depends on what you do. The basic rule is that if you code, you dress down, and if you sell, you dress up. If you used to code but now you own, you still dress down, but your Old Navy \$10 T-shirt is now a Comme des Garçons \$80 number. If you used to own but now you code, well ... let's just pretend that sort of thing doesn't happen.

About the worst thing you can do is dig out the suit from that real job you used to have and go marching off to some client hoping to be taken seriously as the public face of an up-and-coming hot develop-

ment shop. You'll be dismissed on sight as an accountant, and throughout the meeting everyone will explain even the most mundane technical terms to you as if you're a small child visiting your parent's office for the first time.

Do not, however, be tempted to go to the other extreme. Turn up to the same meeting in torn, baggy jeans and a Kiss T-shirt, and before you know it you'll be swamped in all manner of unintelligible jargon, until they begin to realize you're an impostor, take you out to the parking lot and begin the stoning.

So, what should you do? If you're technically inclined, you really can wear anything you want. If you look like a homeless person after a rough night, all will be well and





a "figure 4." Says Seid, "This is considered vulgar in other countries." A third slide shows a woman nervously running her hands through her hair. "No nervous habits!" Seid scolds.

Etiquette also gives new meaning to the California concept of "personal space." For example, how close should you stand to your Japanese client? Seid whips out her elementary-school ruler. Appropriate "conversation distance" in Japan is 36 inches. "Never take a step closer!" she warns. Arabs are in your face at 12 inches: "If you're not willing to stand close, you're not willing to do business." On North American soil, if you're having cocktails at a Palo Alto, Calif., hot spot, converse no closer than 19 inches.

"Life is a box of faux pas," Seid cautions, passing on one of her favorite quotes. "In time, you, too, will acquire a sense of what's appropriate."

### How do you do?

Take introductions. Should you say, "May I present Slate Shinglehouse" or "I'd like you to meet Slate Shinglehouse"? *Meet* sounds fine to me, Seid shakes her head emphatically. "Never use the word *meet*. You can

never hit the emphasis on the right syllable. *Present* makes someone feel important."

"Hello" is correct but not "It's a pleasure to meet you"—unless you're greeting a celebrity.

"How about 'Howdy?'" asks a beefy guy in a loud plaid shirt who's waving his hand. Seid answers politely with a stern smile: "No."

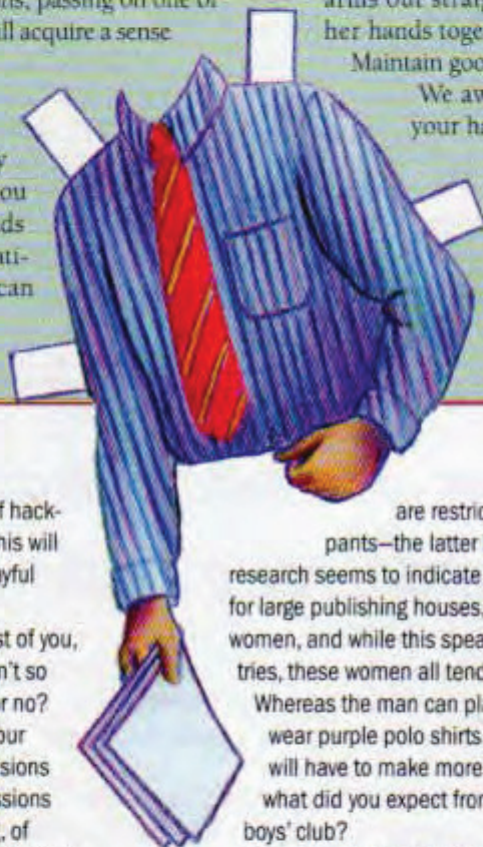
### A good grasp

We're just as clueless when it comes to the proper "global handshake."

"Always shake web to web," Seid says, thrusting her arms out straight from her shoulders, then clasping her hands together. "Grasp the hand firmly and briefly. Maintain good eye contact and good posture."

We awkwardly shake our own hands. "Push your hand all the way in," she coaches. "This is the kind of feeling—a little squeeze—that you want to remember."

"Women, you need to be the winner in the handshake. Get your hand out first!" Seid orders. She clicks on a



you'll be held in high regard as some sort of hacking genius. If you decide to dress up a bit, this will be taken as playful eccentricity.

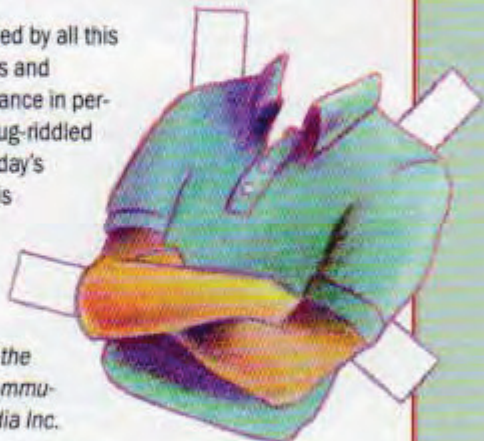
For the rest of you, the rules aren't so relaxed. Tie or no? Jacket? Comb your hair? Tricky decisions all. First impressions are everything, of course, and it's always good to show careful respect for that multibillion-dollar client. For subsequent meetings, perhaps think about losing the tie. After all, "We're wired, man—we don't have to be stuffy."

The rules are more blurred for women. Coder babes can have cyberchick-chic dowdy outfits, just like their male counterparts. Those on the marketing side

are restricted to a choice between hose or pants—the latter being less accountantlike. Casual research seems to indicate that many of the decision makers for large publishing houses, studios and record labels are women, and while this speaks well for their respective industries, these women all tend to look corporate and fashionable. Whereas the man can play the "Hey, it's new media, let's wear purple polo shirts and chinos" game, you, my dear, will have to make more of an effort. Unfair? Yes, but then what did you expect from the modern boys' club?

In summary, don't be fooled by all this talk about casual workplaces and telecommuting: Your appearance in person is as important as the bug-riddled demo you're hawking. Yesterday's plaid suit with polka-dot tie is today's pink slip.

*Nicholas Baker, Upside's former executive publisher, is now managing director of the Business Computing and Communications Group at CMP Media Inc. As an Englishman in Silicon Valley, he has experienced real angst in coming up with a wardrobe strategy.*





slide showing a woman's limp-wristed shake: "That shows a lack of confidence."

However, the cardinal sin of handshaking, the ultimate sign of disrespect, is when a man gives a woman a wimpy handshake, then turns around and firmly shakes a man's hand. Seid lowers her voice and says confidentially, "Men, do you in your heart of hearts know that you do this? If so, please stop."

Also to be avoided at all costs: the priest's or politician's shake, where your extra hand pats the handshake all-knowingly "in a show of dominance."

One brave engineering type confesses that he worries about having a clammy handshake. Seid nods understandingly and confides her secret solution. "If it's severe," she advises, "spray antiperspirant on your hand or dab it with a handkerchief."

### *Dining with style*

"Like little boats out to sea, I eat my soup away from me!" Seid is chanting as the 20 accomplished networking managers and I try to spoon our cream of asparagus soup without making indiscreet clinking sounds or disgracing ourselves with drips.

*The cardinal sin of handshaking is when a man gives a woman a wimpy handshake, then turns around and firmly shakes a man's hand.*

Just trying to navigate the maze of flatware and the appropriate "resting" positions for knives and forks is daunting. Seid has spent about an hour flicking through slide after tiresome slide in preparation—this could be an NET product launch—for the formal luncheon. The most common mistake? Breaking off and buttering more than one piece of bread. "Butter only one piece at a time!" our coach admonishes.

Even passing the salt has hidden dangers. Never hand it to someone; place it on the table. Don't risk touching your dining partner, which people in some cultures believe could pass along your "negative energy."

And ladies, where should you place your handbags? Never put them on the table. Seid pulls out her handy "purse hanger" (part of her portable etiquette kit), a hook that fits on the table edge. (Seid got hers in Japan, where criminals don't steal bags dangling from tables.)

One thing is clear: If business card-passing etiquette emanates from the East, dining etiquette comes from the West—at least according to Seid, who's attempting to revolutionize our eating habits. To be "cosmopolitan" geeks, she explains, we must abandon our provincial American dining habits and eat continental style, like proper Eurocentrics. That means knife in the right hand, fork in the left. "As we enter the

next century and become more global, you don't want to do anything that makes you stand out!" Seid lectures with missionarylike zeal.

We attack our rubbery chicken. "Tines always down," corrects Seid as she checks our fork positions.

Struggling to saw through my chicken, I have a strong urge to just pick it up. "Never pick up food at a business lunch!" announces Seid, preventing an embarrassing infraction.

Craig Forbes, director of product management (and built like a quarterback), snaps to attention. "Are you telling me ribs have to be eaten with a knife and fork?" he asks in disbelief.

Seid replies tactfully, "Foods to be avoided at business meetings are foods that make you look ugly."

She then pauses to observe Forbes, who obviously enjoys his food. "If you're a fast eater," she notes, "you must monitor the pace of the table." With his fork in midair, Forbes blurts out, "You're talking about breaking things down that have been going on since I was 2 years old!"

Seid ignores the fact that Forbes seems to be maxing out on all this culture. With four hours to go, she's far from finished. (Actually, in coming weeks, Forbes will distinguish himself as a star pupil, enthusiastically converting to a "complete conti-

mental diner.") But by 1 p.m., like Forbes, I'm saturated with refinement. However, my next mission beckons—dressing nerds for success.

### *Woes of the Valley's refined*

For Annette Motoyama, an account manager at Mountain View, Calif.-based Silicon Graphics Inc., the dressing dilemma is inverted: how to dress more like her propeller-head clientele. Motoyama's problem: Her designer suits intimidate the scientists and engineers she pitches at biotech and pharmaceutical startups. Many of them adhere to the Valley's idea of haute couture: computer-conference T-shirts and jeans so stretched out that the baggy rear end droops below their buttocks.

One day during a sales call, a security guard tipped her off. He took one look at Motoyama's \$800 St. John knit suit and remarked, "You're way too dressed up for this place!"

Recognizing that she needed help, Motoyama hired a professional image consultant to teach her how to "dress down." As we chat in Motoyama's immaculate Cupertino, Calif., home (a gold Mercedes is in the driveway), Elaine Houghton, owner of San Jose-based VIP Images, is rifling through Motoyama's closet, trying to unearth geek-friendly wear



among the legions of black and dark-blue Anne Klein, Bebe and St. John dresses and suits.

"Your first lesson," Houghton announces, "is that black will always be more dressy. Your challenge is to bring some color into all your black outfits."

Motoyama nods. Houghton has already nixed most of Motoyama's treasured collection of gold belts, necklaces and bracelets—stuff no self-respecting techie would be caught dead in. She now holds up a nautical-looking red St. John double-breasted jacket with gold trim.

"Can you dress that down?" I ask skeptically. Houghton is looking pleased. "Absolutely. It will work great with a pair of jeans."

Motoyama gasps, "Are you kidding? With jeans?" (Her jeans, in a neatly creased stack, are worn only for such private moments as taking out the garbage.)

**H**oughton is undeterred. "Your second challenge is to get away from wearing skirts. You're going to buy more pants, nice pants. And jeans." She jots down needed wardrobe items, including more pants, shoes without gold buckles, plain belts and T-shirts. Motoyama, looking miserable, reminds Houghton that she doesn't have to "look like my clients," just put them at ease.

### *Fry's: A geek fashion show*

To give me a firsthand look at these fundamental "do's and don'ts," we head to Fry's Electronics in Sunnyvale, where Houghton spends an hour critiquing the bizarre procession of outfits.

She points to a middle-aged guy in short, droopy olive pants with cuffs dragging on the ground. Houghton says, "They should bend at the top of his shoes."

Shoes are a wild mishmash. "Geeks buy whatever is cheapest and most convenient," Houghton explains while pointing to an array of passing hiking boots, tennis shoes and cross-trainers.

Next she spots "a domesticated geek"—married, with baseball cap, T-shirt and worn flannel shirt hanging out over his jeans. Houghton says with a chuckle, "A geek's woobie [security blanket] is his flannel shirt."

A man rushes by in what our wardrobe expert describes as a "this is what was clean this morning" outfit, followed by "a color geek" wearing a striped fuchsia and purple shirt, bright purple pants and brown hiking shoes. She rates both of these color-burst outfits unsuitable, even for a struggling startup.

What about female geeks? "They dress either extremely baggy or extremely tight," Houghton notes. There's no shortage of

*Next she spots "a domesticated geek" wearing a flannel shirt. Says Houghton, "A geek's woobie [security blanket] is his flannel shirt."*

Houghton informs her pupil of the golden rule of geek attire: "No dirt, no holes, no skin." Because she's married to a Valley engineer, Houghton can offer valuable insights into the tech mind-set when it comes to fashion. They include the following tenets:

- Geeks usually still have their clothes from high school, including their underwear.
- Geeks don't like to tuck in things.
- Geeks like to wear socks with their sandals.
- Geeks don't like to cut their hair—at least not regularly.

For Motoyama to make a successful transition into such an aesthetically barren fashion landscape, Houghton knows she must take gradual steps. "I'll take you to Casual Corner to do some shopping," Houghton suggests. Motoyama visibly shudders.

Although Houghton recognizes that Silicon Valley's industrial-park dress standards are rock-bottom, she argues that there are minimal standards—among them colors that don't clash, no competitor giveaways and pants that don't drag on the ground. Her pet peeves: "an Apple Computer employee wearing a Compaq T-shirt" and T-shirts that grip potbellies like spandex.

"baggies" or "tights" at Fry's, like the chunky engineer-type squeezed into brown stretch bell-bottoms.

But our favorite is the Generation Y'er (a person less than 25) we spot inside Fry's, shopping for esoteric gadgets hand-in-hand with her boyfriend. She's wearing the essential foundation articles—black T-shirt, skintight black biker shorts—but this ensemble is set off with a sheer scarf, converted into a skirt-like sarong over her shorts. The "sarong" slits open in the front, exposing her stick-thin, alabaster-white legs, and she's wearing brown platform hiking boots.

"She's trying to make a statement," sniffs Houghton, signaling a definite thumbs-down. But I disagree: This outfit may be a fashion faux pas—akin to buttering two pieces of bread—but in such chicless terrain, this kind of élan must be nurtured.

This vampish upstart pivoting in the aisle of Fry's could be Silicon Valley's own Yves St. Laurent. Imagine the potential: a line of haute couture that emanates not from the high-fashion salons of Paris and Milan but from the cubicles of Sunnyvale and Mountain View—geekware, the next Silicon Valley innovation. ■

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