

IN THE BATTLE FOR BUSINESS, THE SCHOOL OF PROTOCOL TEACHES VICTORY THROUGH DECORUM.

ROUND UP > Solutions



by Greg Akers

Mind Your Manners

Debbie Neal teaching Continental-style at Napa Café.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, A POP QUIZ: 1. How much should you tip a baggage handler or skycap? 2. When is it appropriate to talk business when you're lunching with a new/potential client? 3. Where do you sit to control the "power seat" when you're having a business lunch? (Answers at end of story.)

According to scientific studies, over 90 percent of all communication is nonverbal. That's one reason why, when conducting business, it's critical that you can do more than just talk a good game. Everything you do carries a message. Often, what it comes down to is, do you know how to conduct yourself properly or not, and, if not, why are you worthy of getting my business? A deal can be lost on a gaffe in etiquette or a breach of protocol. Some business is won or lost on the slimmest of margins, and you could be beat out by nothing more than a competitor knowing better than you how to properly eat a salad.

Luckily, there are standards of protocol, and you can erase a lifetime's worth of bad habits with a little bit of education. That's where Debbie Neal comes in. She founded the School of Protocol in Memphis in 2005, making it her life's work to help people behave themselves.

"Everyone needs good manners," Neal says. She's a graduate of the American School of Protocol in Atlanta, and, among other things, is certified in specialties such as business etiquette and teaching children.

Neal got the idea for the school after spending years appalled by the bad etiquette she encountered when conducting her own business. Besides, she jokes, "my girls have always told me I never stop."

Photograph by MURRAY RISS

On the corporate side of things, Neal offers what amounts to a complete business-behavior makeover: She schools people in business etiquette, appearance, wardrobe, body language, networking, dining — even email etiquette. As her company's motto promises: "Outclass your competition." She offers corporate and group seminars and private consultations. Past clients include law and accounting firms, real estate agents, small-business owners, and hotel and restaurant staff.

Bad dining etiquette can be particularly pernicious to your business. Business lunch can be a chess game where one wrong move will have you checkmated before coffee's been served. Neal's School of Protocol can help: She'll teach you how to mind your peas (how *do* you get them on your fork when eating Continental-style?) and cues (how to let the server know when you're finished with a course).

In addition to adults, Neal schools youngsters, teens, and college students on the niceties of proper conduct. She has taught manners to elementary-school kids and etiquette and interview skills at Memphis University School and Hutchison, and to sorority girls across the Southeast. "I can teach everyone from 5 to 105," she says. Because it's never too soon — or late — to learn how to make a great first and lasting impression.

MBQ

Answers: 1. \$1.00 per bag is acceptable. 2. When the table is cleared of the meal and the coffee is served. 3. Yeah, right, like I'm gonna tell you that.