Professional etiquette: The protocols you didn’t learn in nursing school

Don’t let etiquette errors sabotage your career success.

By Kathleen D. Pagana, PhD, RN

If you’re aiming for advancement and career success, you need more than clinical expertise, more than management savvy, more than leadership skills. You need to practice professional etiquette.

Many nurses already know that following social conventions is just as important to career advancement as networking at nursing conventions. After my seminars on professional etiquette, nurses ask me about everything from e-mail decorum to table manners. Here are 15 of the most common questions with answers that reflect the principles of etiquette: kindness, consideration, and common sense.

Q. Am I judged by my handshake?
A. Yes. Shaking hands is part of creating a first impression and sending a parting message. Your handshake should be firm and confident. A weak handshake can imply a lack of confidence. A crushing handshake can imply dominance. Always stand up when you shake hands. This applies to women, too.

Q. Should my e-mails include a signature block?
A. Absolutely. The number of professionals who don’t use this feature amazes me. A signature block that includes your name, address, phone number, fax number, and e-mail address provides many ways to contact you and indicates your time zone, so people know when they can call.

Q. If I am the guest at a business meal and my host orders an appetizer, should I order one, too?
A. Positively. Your host should not eat any course alone. Your appetizer can be as simple as tomato juice.

Q. Does it matter where I place my name tag?
A. It certainly does. Place it on the right side of your chest near the collar area. That way, others can easily read it when shaking your hand. When you shake hands, your right shoulder is thrust forward and your left shoulder moves out of the other person’s line of sight. If you are wearing a lanyard, shorten the strap, so the name tag is at chest level.

Q. If I am networking at a reception, how can I politely excuse myself from an extended conversation with one person?
A. To cordially withdraw from such a conversation so you can network with others, try these tactics:
   - Say, “It was great talking with you. I’ll let you have some time to talk with others.”
   - Say, “It was nice meeting you. Hope to see you later.”
   - Say, “Well, Theresa, it has been nice talking with you. Will you excuse me? I see Denise over there, and I promised I’d catch up with her.”
   - Introduce the person to someone else and excuse yourself.

Q. If the lettuce pieces in my salad are too big, is cutting them considered appropriate?
A. Yes, it is. Cutting large pieces of lettuce is better than trying to stuff them into your mouth. Be sure to cut just a few pieces at a time.

Q. Should I pass the salt and pepper together?
A. Yes, you should. Pass them together even if the person asked for only one or the other. Don’t use the salt or pepper while passing them.

Q. Should I taste my food before seasoning it?
A. Definitely. Adding salt or pepper before tasting your food is an insult to the chef who prepared your meal. Keep in mind that using too much seasoning can appear childish.

Q. Where do I place my spoon when I finish with my soup?
If a service plate is beneath the bowl, rest your spoon there. If not, rest it in the bowl. Never place a used utensil on the table.

Q: What should I do if plates are being cleared from the table and I am the only person not finished eating?
A: Leave the remaining food. Eating should be like a dance with everyone beginning and ending together. Try to keep pace with others.

Q: Is picking up a piece of bread and dipping it into the sauce on my plate considered acceptable?
A: No, it’s not. Instead, break off a piece of your bread. Then, use your fork to spear it, dip it in the sauce, and put it in your mouth.

Q: How do I handle answering questions when I have food in my mouth?
A: Take small bites, so you can quickly finish and swallow the food. Never speak with food in your mouth. Remember that the main purpose of a business meal is business. Eating is secondary.

Q: What should I do if my dinner fork falls under the table?
A: Leave it there. You should not disappear under the table. Ask the server for another fork.

Q: If I am the guest at a dinner, should I offer to pay the tip?
A: No, you shouldn’t. To calculate the tip, you would have to see the bill. You are the guest. The host should pay the bill and leave the tip.

Q: If I see someone at a reception and forget his or her name, what should I do?
A: Walk up, smile, put out your hand, and say your name. The person should state his or her name.

Path to success
If you’re committed to career advancement, you face the challenge of interacting well in business and social settings. Professional etiquette can guide you in unfamiliar situations and help you know what to expect from others. Use it to initiate new relationships and enhance established ones on your path to success.

Kathleen D. Pagana, keynote speaker and author, wrote The Nurse’s Etiquette Advantage: How Professional Etiquette Can Advance Your Nursing Career. She has published more than 20 articles on etiquette and can be contacted at www.KathleenPagana.com.

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