



GIVE AND
RECEIVE
BUSINESS
CARDS WITH
BOTH HANDS
AND DON'T
JUST WHIP
IT INTO
YOUR
POCKET.

Don't lick your knife!

(and other business dinner taboos)

While chatting recently with Sandie Currie, director of sales & marketing at the Westin Nova Scotian in Halifax about the do's and don'ts of business schmoozing, she said, "There's never two chances to make a first impression. Managing that expectation and being prepared in every aspect is critical." Being a food and restaurant buff, I wondered out loud: *So what are the implications when inviting a guest to dinner?*

"If you have the opportunity, take them to a place that features local products, local seafood, local culinary talent," Currie said. "Something unique to your town or city. Also treat them to indigenous wines and brewery products."

Dining out is a great way to strut your stuff vis-à-vis what your town or city has to offer. But Currie cautions: "Remove the element of surprise. Ask about food preferences. Don't assume you know what they want. Many people have food allergies. And some people may not be interested in a long five-course meal, especially if they've been traveling any distance." In the process, find out about dietary requirements, for example, halal, vegetarian, no alcohol, kosher—the list goes on.

If you're organizing a large food event, Currie emphasizes the importance of taking personal responsibility for the experience. Be clear on your goals. Is the purpose to entertain, win over, educate, sell, or say thank you? She said that what you do and how you approach those elements will affect the outcome, adding, "Knowing your audience—and their expectations—is key."

Neil Jacobsen concurs. As chief operating officer for Enterprise Saint John, he arranges for numerous business functions. He adds, "theatre, art and culture, dining, restaurants... these assets are like a backdrop to the whole process of engaging the client in what's going on in your community." It's all about connecting guests with decision makers and making sure they have the best possible exposure to the community.

This requires research. You need to do your homework. It can also get complicated if your visitors are from different cultures or various parts of the world.

Say there's a delegation coming in from Japan. You need to know the relationship between the people coming in and who has seniority. "This has a

bearing on how you do business to how you seat people at dinner—even to the kind of food you serve. Those are the kinds of details you need to focus on," Jacobsen said.

Did you know that Japanese men tend to be offended when women wear trousers at a business function? And that it's customary to give and receive business cards with both hands? Furthermore, don't just whip someone's card into your pocket. It's important to show respect by examining the card closely. If the exchange takes place at a dinner, place the card on the table in front of you.

In the case of hosting someone from Japan, Jacobson suggests talking with Japanese people in your community or someone who's done business there. Also, find out how different cultures approach business-making decisions. Some come in and make decisions very quickly; others do multiple site visits.

Another route is to contact the Canadian Trade Commissioner Service (infoexport.gc.ca). With over 900 trade commissioners in over 140 cities (four in Atlantic Canada) there's a lot of savvy there for the using. Even using the site's search feature can unearth a wealth of information about business etiquette in different countries.

Some cities have Honorary Consuls—people who have no diplomatic status with the government, but they often represent cultural communities. Many Honorary Consuls have miles of credentials and business acumen. Ditto presidents of cultural associations.

Another tip: visit the reference section at your local library. I was recently directed to a useful series written by Roger Axtell titled "Do's and Taboos Around the World".

I was so impressed that I called him. Approachable guy. (And he's offered to speak anywhere in Atlantic Canada for 25 per cent less than what he's listed for in U.S. speaker's bureaus.) His books are jam-packed with practical information related to doing business in different countries. Topics include everything from hosting international visitors to conversational taboos, dining protocol and gift giving.

Axtell also recommended Culture Grams (culturegrams.com), a database containing pithy profiles for over 200 countries.

So, best be prepared. Ask questions. Do your homework. And for heaven's sake, don't lick your knife. There's a classic case where this one gesture was the kiss of death to a \$30 million dollar deal. That's one expensive lick!

ABM

Sandra Phinney has penned hundreds of business articles. She also writes a culinary column for *The Atlantic Co-operator* and is a regular food columnist for *Living Healthfully* in Atlantic Canada. "Addendum" is a new department in *Atlantic Business Magazine* that will cover topics like food trends for meetings and conventions, wine etiquette, and where to find laptop-friendly eateries. If you have any ideas, comments or suggestions about this article or future articles, send them to Sandra at: s.phinney@ns.sympatico.ca