

Lawyer Etiquette from a Southern Gentleman

As we saw in the 2020 award-winning film “Hillbilly Elegy,” not every law student is adequately prepared to enter the law world. Gabriel Basso plays J.D. Vance, a student at Yale Law School who finds himself confused about which bread plate and drinking glasses belong to him at a dinner party during Yale’s interview week.



Jaffe Staff

Whether you have landed your dream summer clerkship, are still looking or in your first years as an associate, the social or business interactions in a meeting, a business dinner or a social mixer can make or break relationships. Early in my legal marketing career, a wise emeritus lawyer told me, “It’s no longer the practice of law, but the business of law.” Success is directly linked to how well we can [build strong relationships](#).

Here’s a crash course for young lawyers on social and professional etiquette rules, from where to wear a name badge to when to send a thank-you note. Learn from a Southern gentleman who spent way too many hours in cotillion training.

Business Development Etiquette

Business Card Shuffle

Designate one pocket for your own business cards and another one for the ones you receive. I keep mine in my right pants pocket, and put someone’s card in the left breast pocket of my jacket. I do this to keep the cards separated. Figure what works for you. You don’t want to shuffle through the cards you have received to find your own card, or hand out someone else’s card instead of your own.

Get Linked

After you receive someone’s business card, make a note or two on it about where and when you met them. Add them to your [LinkedIn network](#) by sending a personal message saying it was nice to meet them at the specific event.

Thank You, Thank You

Always send customized, handwritten thank-you notes by snail mail within 10 days after a lunch or meeting where you are trying to gain someone’s business or build a relationship. Make a few mental notes during your interaction that could easily translate to a thank-you note. This tip I picked up in college, and it’s helped me build a large book of business over the years.

Talk Less, Smile More

In “Hamilton,” Aaron Burr famously said, “Talk less, smile more.” This could not be truer in the business networking arena. So many times, people are so busy trying to get what they want, they miss out on what is standing in front of them. Showing interest to the person

you are speaking to is not just business etiquette; it is general politeness. Show genuine interest because you never know how your worlds could connect.

Business Etiquette

Arrive on Time

Vince Lombardi lived by the motto, "If you're early for a meeting, you're on time. If you're on time, you're late. And if you're late, don't bother showing up." In the legal world, every minute is worth money. Time is a commodity. Be punctual and show respect to others.

Emails

I have five rules for email etiquette: Always respond. Touch the correspondence the fewest number of times possible. Don't Reply All if not necessary (corollary: Triple-check before hitting Send to make sure you don't embarrass yourself or your firm with an inappropriate Reply All). Don't spill personal tea in professional emails. And don't talk in an email like you would in a text message – in other words, avoid LOLs, emojis and the like.

Meetings

Be prepared, on time and concise. A managing partner once told a sales professional that he had one hour to make his presentation and sell his product. If the sales professional couldn't do this in an hour, the managing partner wasn't interested in the product.

Social Etiquette

Nametag Placement

When you arrive at an event, place your nametag on the right side of your chest. This creates an optimal eyesight trail from the handshake to your nametag.

The B&D Trick

You sit down at the table and can't tell which bread plate or drink glass is yours. Discreetly, place your hands on your thighs under the tablecloth and form the OK symbol with each hand. Your left hand creates a b and your right hand creates a d. This simple trick reminds you that your bread plate is on the left side of your place setting and your beverage glasses are on your right.

Four Letters v. Five Letters

Here's how to remember the proper placement for flatware. The word fork has four letters, as does left; fork is on the left. The words spoon and knife each have five letters, as does the word right.

When you've figured out what is yours, start with the outermost utensils and work your way in course by course.

Don't Be Afraid to Ask

Your napkin is white, your lower garment (pants or skirt) is dark. Don't be afraid to ask for a dark napkin if you don't want white lint fuzz all over your pants or skirt.

The best part of networking and growing your business is the opportunity to meet and get

to know so many people. When I was president of the Houston Bar Association Auxiliary, we offered a course on etiquette to law schools, law clerks and law firms. This course brings everyone up to speed on today's business and social etiquette expectations. Helpful advice and tools such as these can help polish your professional image and make you even more successful.

Do you have questions about how a program like this could be implemented at your firm? Reach out to Terry M. Isner, at tisner@jaffepr.com.