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Marsha L. Bayless
Nelson Rusche College of Business, Stephen F. Austin State University, mbayless@sfasu.edu

Timothy W. Clipson
Nelson Rusche College of Business, Stephen F. Austin State University, tclipson@sfasu.edu

Clive Muir
Stephen F Austin State University, muirc@sfasu.edu

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Marsha Bayless, Ed.D. (Corresponding Author)
Professor, Business Communication & Legal Studies Dept.
The Nelson Rusche College of Business
Stephen F. Austin State University
PO Box 13060, SFA Station
Nacogdoches, TX 75962
mbayless@sfasu.edu
936-468-1496
Or
936 468-3103
Fax: 936-468-1515

Tim Clipson, Ed.D.
Professor, Business Communication & Legal Studies Dept.
The Nelson Rusche College of Business
Stephen F. Austin State University

Clive Muir, PhD
Associate Professor, Business Communication & Legal Studies Dept.
The Nelson Rusche College of Business
Stephen F. Austin State University

Abstract

The business meal is a popular activity in the workplace and is often included as part of the interview process. Sometimes it is used as a screening mechanism to determine if a candidate possesses certain social (soft) skills suited for a company. Thus, it is fitting that college students understand business meal etiquette as they embark on their careers. This article reports the findings of a survey of students' awareness of business meal etiquette and their preferences for possible training and development.

Business Meal Etiquette: A Survey Of Student Awareness And Preferences

Business education courses have long included a section related to the resume and the job interview. These topics easily lead into the job search process. At a time of intense competition among high school and college graduates for entry-level jobs, it is imperative that our students are as prepared as possible when they graduate from our programs. One aspect of the interview process that a potential employer is likely to observe is the candidate's soft skill set, and one way in which they measure soft skills is through the display of dining etiquette at a business meal (Washington, 2004). For that reason, we as business educators would want to assess our students' awareness of business dining customs in order to help them succeed in this area of workplace communication.

Business etiquette is a key component of the meal. Many institutions include some type of etiquette meal function for their business students. This may be done as part of a campus organization or for a specific academic class or even as a project by the College of Business (Krajewski, 2009). The primary focus of this activity is to acquaint students with correct table manners and behaviors. Research on this topic was conducted from the mid- to late- 1990s (Mausehund, Dortch, Brown, & Bridges, 1995; McPherson, 1998; and Scott, 1995). The research ranged from what students didn't know about business etiquette (Mausehand, Dortch, Brown, & Bridges, 1995) to understanding the business etiquette used at dinner (McPherson, 1998) to using international business meals as a way to develop communication and interpersonal skills (Scott, 1995).

As a research topic, the agenda appears to have moved from interviewing over a meal to dealing with business meals successfully in the business career. Cabral-Cardoso and Cunha (2003) discuss the agendas that are posed at the business lunch. Perfecting your etiquette at a business lunch is important even after you have the job (Tims, 2010). Indeed, even what you

choose to eat may influence how you are perceived by interviewers, coworkers, and clients

(Stein, 2010).

Increasingly, however, it appears that interviews and meal interaction as a research topic

may need to be revisited. Sparking this interest is an increase in online information that is being

presented to eager job seekers. Burns (2010) and Cooley (2011) offer tips for lunch interviews,

while EtiquetteScholar.com (n.d.) provides an array of guidelines on dining etiquette in domestic

and international business and social settings. If job seekers are competent in this area, why are

so many job employment web sites stressing the information?

Universities also post information on etiquette for students who are transitioning to

careers after graduation. For example, Virginia Tech provides a section on Dining Etiquette

(Dining Etiquette Q & A, n.d.), and the business school at the University of Arkansas offers

similar tips (Social and Dining Etiquette, n.d.). With online and university interest in correct

dining etiquette, it appears to be an area of concern for future graduates of university programs.

Purpose

The purpose of this exploratory study was to pose a series of questions related to business

meal etiquette to students at a regional AACSB-accredited university to determine their

knowledge, to gauge their willingness to have training on the topic, and to judge their confidence

level with business meal etiquette.

Procedures

A twenty-three question survey was developed using categories of dining etiquette published as Dining Etiquette Q & A on the Career Services website of Virginia Tech University (Dining Etiquette Q & A, n.d.). The researchers chose specific questions and adapted the questions to offer a choice of four possible answers for each question.

The survey was completed by 123 students in the spring 2013 semester. Students were given the option to do the survey as a bonus activity in the course in which they were enrolled. The courses used were sections of sophomore-level BCM 247 Business Communication (88 respondents), and senior level courses GBU 440 Records Management (12 respondents), BCM 447 Administrative Communication (13 respondents), and BCM 450 Leadership Communication (10 respondents).

Results

The participants in the study were asked to answer fifteen questions directly related to business etiquette in the setting of an interview meal. The researchers determined that if less than 70% of the respondents gave the correct answer, the question would be labeled incorrect. Using this standard, of the fifteen questions, eight were answered correctly with a response higher than 70%. That means that 53.3% of the questions were answered correctly.

Students were asked how confident they felt in their skills for dining in a business setting. They provided open-ended responses. Seventy-one percent (71%) seemed confident, 11% felt unsure and 18% felt they lacked confidence in these situations. Of those who seemed confident, statements like the following were given:

- Yes, I think I can make it through an interview meal using the proper maners [sic] I have picked up over the years.
- Yes, I am well-mannered so I don't see it as a problem.

- Feel confident; but, sure there are some things I oculd [sic] learn about proper business etiquette.
- I feel like I know enough about being polite when it comes to dining in a business setting but I know that there is definitely more that I don't know that I would like to learn.

Comments by students who felt unsure of their business etiquette offered comments such as the following:

- Not after reading this. I didn't realize there were so many things to observe about a person's eating habits. Even if they are considered normal.
- Somewhat. I have never been to a meal for a business setting.
- Sort of. I feel like it would be that much more intimidating but I feel like I could handle it.

Of particular interest were those comments that reflected a lack of confidence as illustrated below:

- Not really, because I mostly go out to dinner with my friends and I never consider etiquette.
- After these questions, I do not. I feel I need to brush up on my etiquette skills.
- No, I'm unclear of specific business etiquette on interviews.
- No, I have never been introduced to the idea of a business meal and I am unsure of the proper etiquette.
- No, I don't like eating with people.

The students were asked if they were interested in having training on business etiquette. Figure 1 shows the results crosstabbed by classification and interest in training. Those who were interested in training were 42% (52), those who were unsure were 26% (32), and those who were not interested in training were 32% (39).

Figure 1. Interested in Training in Business Etiquette by Classification				
Classification	**Yes**	**No**	**Unsure**	**Response Totals**
Freshman	11.5% (6)	12.8% (5)	25.0% (8)	15.4% (19)
Sophomore	32.7% (17)	30.8% (12)	31.3% (10)	31.7% (39)
Junior	28.8% (15)	33.3% (13)	21.9% (7)	28.5% (35)
Senior	26.9% (14)	23.1% (9)	21.9% (7)	24.4% (30)
Total	52	39	32	123

The data was also reviewed by gender as follows in Figure 2. Female students were more

interested in training than male students.

Figure 2: Interested in Training in Business Etiquette by Gender				
Gender	**Yes**	**No**	**Unsure**	**Response Totals**
Female	51.9% (27)	33.3% (13)	53.1% (17)	46.3% (57)
Male	48.1% (25)	66.7% (26)	46.9% (15)	53.7% (66)
Total	52	39	32	123

When asked about the best way that business etiquette could be included in the

curriculum, the highest response was 52.1% of the students preferring a seminar or workshop

which involves actually eating a business meal and using the etiquette.   The second highest

response of 34.5% was to have career placement involved in providing training on dining

etiquette.

Conclusions

Only slightly over half of the respondents were able to answer the questions related to business meal etiquette at the 70% level. This seems like an area that needs improvement.

There appears to be a gender difference in the value students place on business dining etiquette as determined by less than half of the male students believing training on the topic was important.

While the over 70% of students expressed confidence in their etiquette skills, this was not borne out by the answers that were generated to the etiquette questions.

Recommendations

Based on this exploratory study, it seems that business etiquette dining is an activity that college students are lacking in both knowledge and skill. Curriculum should be developed to provide specific business meal etiquette that will help our students succeed during a formal business meal or interview. Possible places to put this in the curriculum might be in a workshop/seminar attached to a capstone course, in a course which provides interviewing/resume training, or in a senior transition course. The career services office and some student organizations may also play a role in developing business dining skills and knowledge among students.

Implications

With today's fast food preponderance, students have less opportunity to learn appropriate dining manners and then to apply those manners to a business interview setting. If students were also exposed to business dining opportunities at the high school and community college-postsecondary level, they would have an improved level of confidence by the time they reached the college level.

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