

Blog Article

Manners Matter

At a time when bad behavior is rewarded, naughty celebrities are adored, and nasty is the new nice, a blog post about manners not only makes me appear far older than I am and more crotchety than I ever expect to be, it also seems destined to drive readers away. Still, I feel compelled to write on, keenly aware that “mind your manners” has never been a particularly popular phrase (in fact, that you are still reading is almost remarkable!) and mindfully committed to keeping my thoughts relevant and brief.

Be on time

There is a saying in my business: An actor is never on time; an actor is always early. Certainly we all fall prey to the occasional unexpected traffic delay or serious matter that demands immediate attention. But as a habit - and not just in business - this is a practice to be avoided. Arriving late really is the most passive way of saying that you and your schedule matter to you much more than those of other people, and while your friends may gently rib you about it, it is a narcissistic tendency that casts you in a lesser light than you want to deserve.

Be responsive

Failure to respond to someone is not just bad manners, it's bad business, and I am sure it happens too frequently because I am thanked too often (and with too much surprise) for “responding so promptly” to requests for information about the services I provide. Responsiveness is perhaps the most important manner to habituate, particularly in business, because it is so appreciated when offered and so infuriating when denied.

Look at the businesses you most enjoy working with and the people you find the easiest to coordinate activities with. Isn't their attentiveness to you as a person or client among the qualities you find most appealing? Conversely, if you think about the times you have been on the receiving end of radio silence, I would bet that what you heard was actually far louder and more harmful than the non-responder might have imagined.

Certainly, there are times when we delay responding because we do not know how to reply or we have no immediate answer to give. But I assure you that a quick, “I don't know, but I will get back to you soon,” will do worlds of good both in terms of reducing your own stress (overly long to-do lists and bloated flagged-for-reply inboxes cause stress!) and in terms of the good will it engenders.

And while I'm on the subject of responsiveness...

RSVP

Most of the invites I receive to parties, mixers, celebrations, or networking events come courtesy of cyberspace, typically via email. Someone goes to the trouble of conceiving, organizing, and publicizing a happening, and all they ask in return is that I click on the appropriate box denoting my intention to attend or not. Literally, just click. And yet when the event draws near inevitably notification goes out reminding invitees to rsvp because many have not. Chairs need to be set up, food must be ordered, arrangements and payments must be made, and all the organizers need from us is a click. So click. It's such a simple way to make someone else's job infinitely easier.

If you say it, mean it. (And if you mean it, say it!)

Polonius: What do you read, my lord?

Hamlet: Words, words, words.

Hamlet II.ii.191-2

Nowadays there are so many words being bandied about by so many people in so many places, that in many ways they seem to have lost their meaning. But don't let their apparent impuissance fool you: Empty promises, careless guarantees, and unspoken cautions are not just impolite, they are hurtful and actionable as well. So choose your words wisely, promise only that which you fully intend (and are able) to deliver, and remember that while words do have the power to hurt, they have the power to heal as well.

Say thank you often

Books begin with acknowledgements. Oscar winners thank their agents. Career counselors advise following up interviews with a note. Expressing gratitude to people who have given gifts, whether in the form of advice, assistance, opportunity, feedback, or wrapped up with a bow, is just good form, and something most of our moms started us doing when we were just little tykes.

But you do not need to wait for something big to express gratitude. Every day there are people who are helping you along the way, or at least people who are willing to do so. There is kindness and generosity of spirit that I experience regularly, and it comes from both close family and mere acquaintances, from both clients and providers, from both dear friends and people I have the smallest connection to online. Their gestures, no matter how small, when authentic and heartfelt, make a big impact. Plus they add civility to my life.

In return I hope that I am considerate and responsive, punctual and reliable, and that I freely, vigorously, and frequently express my gratitude for all they do.