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ENTERTAINMENT STORY

Don't be a cocktail weenie

Etiquette for admins: Business functions are no party. Here are the rules

Anne Marie Owens
National Post

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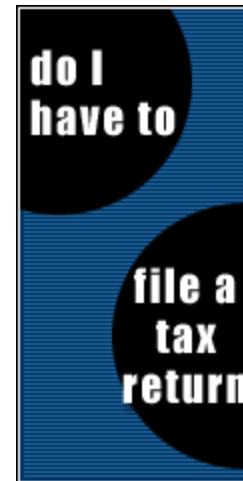
"Let's face it, we've all been one, haven't we? A cocktail weenie, that is."

The women in the packed room at the Administrative Professionals Conference in Toronto nod their heads in agreement as Karen Mallett begins the session that promises to deliver them all from the depths of a particularly crippling form of social dysfunction: successfully mixing business and pleasure.

Mallett, who is one half of the duo known as Canada's Etiquette Ladies, is here to tell the women how they can do better at parties. She is here to



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explain how they can extricate themselves from an interminable conversation with a smile and a handshake.

But perhaps the most important advice she will deliver is this little secret on how to adeptly juggle a cocktail glass without losing the ability to shake hands or hand over a business card: "Hold your drink in your left hand ... Your name tag goes on your right-hand side. Business cards go in your right-hand pocket.



"This way, you're not switching hands. You see people struggling when they're out trying to juggle everything or switching sides all the time. This way is so much simpler."

This is invaluable information for the women -- and they are almost exclusively women -- who are attending Mallett's workshop. They are called administrative assistants and executive assistants and, only rarely now, secretaries, and they are increasingly being pushed to attend social functions on behalf of their bosses and as their company's representative.

Forget the image of the secretary of old, locked away in an office tower taking dictation or filing reports. The new breed of secretary is just as likely to be dispatched to a fundraising reception or a client appreciation banquet to socialize on her company's behalf. They are often the public face of the company in a social setting where the business stakes are high and the possibility of failure all too real.

In a recent survey of administrative professionals across North America, the American Management Association found these workers were spending almost 60% more time on the manager's non-traditional business than they were a year ago. The same survey indicated that although the main responsibilities continued to be tasks such as correspondence, managing appointments and organizing meetings and events, handling non-traditional business accounted for about 11% of their workload.

"The image has lagged behind the reality," says Diane Kelk, spokeswoman

for the Canadian Management Centre, which organized the three-day conference. "These are dynamic, interesting people in these jobs. They are not just filing anymore."

It is perhaps a testament to how valuable they have become that the employers of more than 450 administrative professionals from across the country paid about \$1,500 each just to sign them up for the conference, and then covered the costs of airfare and hotel bills on top of that.

Toni Daguerre, a 45-year-old secretary with a National Institute of Health laboratory in Montana, is here because she says social skills are the key to her advancement. "Our lab is growing and there's going to be a lot of opportunity for promotion. Those jobs are going to go to the people they've seen acting with poise at parties."

Mallett's workshop, "How to Avoid Being a Cocktail Weenie," was packaged as part of what was called a learning track on career development, which put it in the same category as workshops on "Marketing Your Image," "Learning the Tools to Play the Game" and "Finding a Voice in the Global Economy."

The modern concept of business being conducted everywhere has made learning how to finesse social skills as critical as mastering a new computer program.

Mallett, whose Winnipeg-based etiquette firm is called In Good Company, says more and more companies are throwing prospective employees into social situations to see how they interact, or how they treat serving staff at a restaurant, or what kind of table manners they display while out for dinner.

"Generally, you have between 30 and 120 seconds to make a great first impression," she says. "If your company can't count on you to go to an event and mix and mingle, then they'll just find someone else."

"Believe it or not, it's bad manners to park yourself by the shrimp tree and hope that someone interesting will approach you while you're stuffing your face with tiger shrimp ... If you were sent there to meet some great people and develop a client base, then you're not there to eat and drink. Businesswise, it's really important that you're not filling up on food and drink all the time."

She maintains a tough stance when it comes to what she deems

acceptable behaviour at the social functions that do double-duty as business: Don't eat, don't drink, don't monopolize conversation, don't slouch and do not, under any circumstances, act in a way resembling that of people attending a purely social function.

"People may say, 'Oh, it's just for fun. It's just a party.' But it isn't. Don't be fooled. When that promotion comes along, they're going to remember how you looked and how you acted.

"If a company sends you to an event, you should go. If you don't show up, someone is bound to gossip about it. 'Oh, she didn't show up for the breakfast function, I'm sure she was sleeping.' I don't care what city you live in, the world is too small."

She advises against drinking very much because it leads to unbusinesslike behaviour. She advises against eating very much because it essentially distracts from the business at hand, besides often leaving an unsightly mess behind.

"You go to these things and they give you chicken wings or chicken satays on those little sticks or really hot zucchini," says Mallett. "Who plans these things? You know that the minute you take a bite out of something it's going to end up all over you. And then who's going to come along and talk to you -- the big client or the boss. Who's had that happen?"

She lists off the key elements that make a first impression: the handshake ("It should be three little pumps and no, you don't count out loud please"); a good mood, a smile, and eye contact ("Don't look around the room for something better. This isn't dating. This is work. Look at the person in front of you").

But among business people in North America, she says, the number one aspect in making a first impression is posture. Everyone in the audience suddenly shifts a little taller in their chairs at this nugget of information.

Business cards are absolutely critical: "If you don't have a card, go back to your office and get some made," she tells them. "You're not somebody's something. You're not handing out someone else's business cards. You are your own person with a business card. And if you do have them, do not ever leave the house without them."

She coaches them on how to present the cards properly, with the words facing the person you are giving the card to, so they can actually read

them, and tells them never to try to hand out business cards at a funeral, which happened to her when she first launched her business and found herself being asked for a card in a coffin-viewing receiving line.

Mallett also has clear instructions on introductions: In social functions, introductions seem to go according to gender and age, but in business situations, especially the social-business occasions she is priming these women for, people are introduced purely by rank. "The client is always number one, and from then on you introduce by rank, so that the higher in the company, the sooner you introduce them."


She imposes her own five-second rule to ensure she doesn't get left out of the introduction loop. "If you don't get introduced within five seconds then introduce yourself because, chances are, whoever's supposed to introduce you has forgotten," she says.

One of the women asks her how you get out of a conversation with someone you don't want to talk to, a fate she says is inevitable because "we're the admin professionals and it means we're the Dear Abbys of the office."

Mallett suggests quickly but politely saying, "'Oh that sounds so interesting, but I've got to get back to something over there.' And then you tell them there's somebody over here they really have to meet. You take them along and introduce them and say, 'Here you go.' And you're on your way and they don't even notice that you made an escape."

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