

Etiquette en Route

While we're all fairly good about extending etiquette to those who have a direct and continued impact on our lives, we sometimes fall short when it comes to travel etiquette. Maybe that's because many of the courtesies that are extended while traveling by air, car, or ship are typically observed as ritualistic in nature.

Still, as business professionals our goals should always be to maintain a polished image.

Flight manners

Following are suggestions for making your next air trip both comfortable and in keeping with your professional image.

“Excuse me. I need to get out.”

Once you're seated, leaving your seat should be the exception rather than the rule. If you find that getting up and moving around is typically part of your travel ritual, then plan ahead and request an aisle seat.

Meetings in the air

If you're traveling with an associate, supervisor, or customer and plan to discuss business on the plane, arrange for your seats to be next to, rather than across the aisle from, one another. Not only will other airline passengers appreciate not having to overhear your meeting, you will be more apt to maintain the confidentiality of your business.

Respecting your fellow passenger

During flights, some people like to strike up a conversation with the person next to them; others do not. “En route” etiquette dictates that before trying to strike up a conversation, you tune into your fellow passenger's body language, to look for nonverbal clues as to whether the person seated next to you is interested in chatting. Needless to say, it's of utmost importance that you respect your fellow-passenger's wishes. Assuming you haven't observed any body to indicate a conversation opposed to conversing, it's appropriate to initiate a conversation either after your beverage has arrived or when the meal is first served. If your fellow passenger's response is brief and not followed by a question or commentary, take a hint.

Respecting flight attendants

It goes without saying that flight attendants should be treated with respect. If you have a question, for example, pose it when you are being served. Never ring the call bell for an attendant unless it's an emergency. In other words, extend the same courtesy to these professionals that you would to restaurant servers. If you'd like something, ask with a polite, “When you have a minute, may I have...” You can be assured they'll appreciate your respect for their time.

Flight farewells

Although a smile and a good-bye are commonplace as you are exiting a plane, few passengers (or flight-crew members, for that matter) incorporate a thank-you in their farewells. If you've never said, “thank you” as you deboarded a plane, try it next time. You'll probably catch the

crew off guard and even receive a comment of gratitude in return. No matter what distance you've traveled on a flight, a smile and a thank-you go a long way.

Air travel attire

If you're traveling during the work day, wear business attire. If you're traveling after 6 p.m., "business casual" is acceptable (a blazer and skirt for women; sport coat and trousers men). Many business people find that on weekends the travel dress code can be even more casual (skorts or slacks and matching tops for women; polo shirt and slacks for men). No matter when you travel and what you choose to wear, however, be assured that the way you're dressed affects the way you're treated.

Traveling by car

Believe it or not, even yesterday car travel has its own set of etiquette standards. As with much of the business of manners, most are based on courtesy and common sense.

When you're the driver.

When you transport passengers, in many ways you're like a host or hostess who has invited guests into his or her domain. Enhance your role by observing the following amenities:

- Recognize your car is an extension of your office. Rather than making excuses for your backseat or trunk being a mess, plan ahead. Be certain that your vehicle is clean inside and out. The way your car is maintained is a direct reflection on you.
- With the advent of electronic door locks, it has become rare for a driver to manually unlock the door for his passenger(s) when entering the vehicle. Whether you are a man or a woman, I recommend you still extend this courtesy to those who are "guests" in your car. Just think of it as akin to opening the door of your office or home and inviting someone in. Simply insert the key, unlock the car and open the door. Your passenger(s) can take it from there.
- Be tuned into music preferences by your passenger(s). Often the best choice is to simply keep the radio off and use this time for conversation.
- Ask your passenger(s) whether they'd like the radio or the air conditioner higher or lower, etc.

When you're the passenger

When you're being driven to and from a destination, you are in essence, a guest in someone else's space. It follows, then, that your manners should reflect that status. Consider the following etiquette when you're in the passenger's seat.

- Let the person driving set the tone. Some driver's like to talk a lot; others, very little.
- Allow the driver ask *you* whether you'd like the radio on, the air conditioner higher or lower, etc.

Careless car manners

Avoid the three-most common car faux pas by observing the following half-percents:

- Use your car for its intended purpose—not as a dressing room. In other words, women: Refrain from using the rear view mirror to check on your hairdo and makeup. And for goodness' sake, avoid putting on lipstick en route. This seemingly insignificant little gesture has a terrible effect on your professional image.

- If you must eat en route, be discreet. Never, for instance, pop in French fries two at a time. Observe the same high standards of etiquette reserved for the table—as much as possible under the circumstances, of course.
- Fill up your gas tank before picking up your passenger(s). If you're on an extended trip, of course, it becomes necessary to stop and “fill ‘er up.” Whenever possible, however, avoid this practice.

Taxi tidbits

Unless you're in Australia (remember where Crocodile Dundee sat when he traveled by cab through New York City?), it's most appropriate to sit in the back seat. If, however, more than two people are traveling in the same cab, it's perfectly acceptable for the senior associate(s) to be offered the back seat by the junior associate(s), one of whom may take the front seat.

One of those awkward moments of hesitation often arises when it comes time to pay the taxi cab—particularly when the passengers occupy different levels in the business pecking order. I always recommend that junior executives be prepared to take care of the fare if their senior counterparts do not make the initiative to do so. This, again, is one of those play-it-by-ear situations.