



# Business Etiquette: Why Is It Important?

By Haifa Shawwa



It has been quite some time since I first started promoting “business etiquette,” both as a concept and as a learnable skill in Palestine and other Arab countries. I typically had to meet human resources managers in an attempt to sound out and identify their expected “EQ” – employability quotient – for potential employees. After interviewing fresh graduates, I was not very surprised by the results, and I could easily understand the employers’ concerns. It was all about attitude and behaviour. They needed employees who would present a marketable image and display the ability to retain long-term customers and attract new ones. “A successful candidate should be able to market himself to me,” one CEO commented. “Then he would definitely succeed in marketing my company to more and more customers.”

Business etiquette is the connecting link between academia and technical skills. It encompasses not only a refined professional attitude but also appearance, the ability to impress and stand out, and ultimately the establishment of a “brand” presence. First impressions are made even before we say something to prove our knowledge or expertise, so it’s so critical to win this battle. People unfairly judge us through how we carry ourselves, how we react, and what we communicate through our silent messages. Thus, mastering our business-etiquette skills allows us to have almost full control over how others perceive us, and ultimately how they judge us. In sales and service, customers are instinctively attracted to a salesperson/service provider with a smile, a neat, fresh appearance, and the right welcoming body language. Better/higher sales are typically achieved in a friendly, respectful, caring



environment. Customers nowadays are more demanding; they expect a more sophisticated service. It’s not only the quality of the merchandise that they seek, it’s the attention, care, and respect that really attract them and keep them happy and faithful.

Logically speaking, customers are more likely to be attracted to well-behaved, neat, well-groomed service providers or salespeople. They automatically choose to communicate with, ask for information, and buy from them. At a later stage, when customers visit again, they often ask for the specific salesperson who had helped them previously. More importantly, customers will perceive the “brand attitude” of the company through their experience with that particular employee. In other words, customers will normally judge the company’s marketing attitude through the salesperson’s attitude. For this reason employers should be diligent about considering applicants and integrating this kind of learning in their training plans. A work environment that is characterised by positive and pleasant behaviour (business-etiquette skills) has the potential to bring about a significant increase in sales. On the other hand, bad customer service behaviour may not only decrease sales but also repel potential customers. Angry

Perceiving business etiquette as an essential tool for all levels of professionals is the starting point toward personal and corporate development and excellence. From top management to janitors and bus boys, such skills help organisations/companies become more productive and establish a behaviour brand that is part of the professional reputation that all businesses wish for. Promoting a customer-friendly environment has the potential to lead to a dramatic increase in sales.

customers normally feel the need to share their bad experiences with double the number of people that happy customers usually discuss their satisfaction with. Articles published in such reputable magazines as *Forbes* stress the importance of diverse etiquette skills in the workplace as indispensible practices in achieving excellence in any work sector, or all sectors to be more precise. In a *Forbes* article titled “Business Protocol and Etiquette to Increase Sales and Help Develop Better Business Relations,” Jan Yager—sociologist/speaker/consultant with more than 35 books on communication and marketing—describes business protocol/etiquette as a strategy for success for every business sector, including tourism, medicine, banking, and telecommunications.

I remember reading a statement that captures the core of why managers should promote etiquette skills throughout all work environments of all work sectors: “The quality of the



contact with the client has a direct impact on the result." "Quality of the contact" could be interpreted as having a positive and pleasant demeanour or, better, as an attraction rather than a repulsion between customer and salespeople. Attraction also implies retaining long-term customers who would logically promote you to new customers. The sought-after "result" is the "deal"; a positive, satisfactory, unforgettable shopping experience for the customer, and a clearly profitable endeavour for the business owner.

No business sector could expect to really flourish without the aid of professional etiquette. It is the lubricant that keeps heavy machines working smoothly and quietly, preventing breakage and encouraging

production. It is about creating a fluid work environment that respects group rights and individual rights, and that is oriented towards success and profit. It is the real master behind easy teamwork, customer satisfaction, and an exceptional business reputation. All are components of the attitude branding for which every business owner yearns.

In Arab countries, business etiquette is slowly but surely crawling towards its golden era. What at first seemed like a luxury is now in great demand. It is in its powerful launch phase. People in the corporate world knew that something was missing, but the term and concept of business etiquette were not well known. Now almost every aspiring business owner realises and, better still, knows

that it is a crucial component of a successful, impressive business. Interested business owners are currently seeking the services of etiquette experts in such diverse sectors as aviation, entrepreneurship, hospitals, parliaments, and even education.

In Palestine the situation is also encouraging. Employers are obviously becoming more serious about choosing the employee who would best represent them, one who is able to impress and to win new customers without the risk of losing old ones. Fresh graduates who have gone through some kind of business-etiquette training tend to have better chances of overcoming "interview phobia," and winning the job. Banks, organisations, and

prominent corporate institutions obviously perceive the impact of attitude change on customer retention and loyalty. They know that positive and friendly employee behaviour is part of the image branding of the place and definitely part of the profit formula.

The same, however, cannot be said about the public sector in Palestine. Rarely does this body express interest in a collective upgrading of staff, although complaints regarding employee customer-service behaviour are higher compared to those within the private sector. It maybe for funding reasons, or a lack of strategy, or even because the public typically "needs" such services and is unable to find them somewhere else. So they have no other choice but to accept problematic attitudes, whether they like it or not.

But there are some interesting observations that should be noted regarding the motives behind interested organisations/individuals who seek the services of business-etiquette experts in their efforts to either fine-tune their staff's skills or opt to ignore totally the need to integrate it in their yearly training agenda. Some see it as a trend, an atypical training topic that they would love to be pioneers in. These people are never really serious about a needs assessment plan or about achieving an impactful outcome. It's more about ticking that "job done" block in their training-plans agenda. But others are more serious about the aftermath of the training, and they even inquire about the expected ROI (return on investment) straight from the beginning. An attitude-based ROI of course. At this point I talk to them about a more serious long-term return on investment, a money-based return. In other cases, it's about an ambitious open-minded manager's personal perspective on development. And this is the case where one can



particular. People no longer raise an eyebrow when I tell them that etiquette is a crucial subject and that it may make or break established corporations. Everyone is now ready to listen, to know more, and, of course, to consider whether or not this is really what they want to invest in, for themselves and for their businesses. After all, etiquette – social or corporate – will always be a matter of personal choice, a matter of perspective – but a very dangerous one. Opting for it makes one stand out. Ignoring it, well, it's quite an easy choice to make.

sense the highest level of follow up with the expert. This is also where the organisation/company seeks and pursues indicators of attitude change. This is the real road to success.

After many years in this energetic, humane, and ever-changing field of knowledge, I feel that things are finally on the right track, both in the Arab world and in Palestine in

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