

Mind your manners

Etiquette getting nicer with local consultants, how-to classes

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The tables were set with several pieces of glassware, flatware and dinnerware to mark the formality of the occasion. Yet some of the guests committed a social faux pas.

They began putting their rolls on the bread plates to their right and not on their left - the acceptable practice in etiquette circles.

"Once a person starts putting bread on the wrong bread plate, then everybody does it," said Julie Duke, one of the guests at the dinner and a partner in the newly formed Flint-based Protocol Consulting Group.

"It's indicative of the overall decline in appropriate behavior," added Duke, senior major gifts officer in university development at Michigan State University. "We're very casual in the Midwest. Because people don't practice more formal manners, they tend to forget about them."

Rude shop clerks, enraged drivers and a general malaise about manners seemed to be pervasive - until recently.

Just when you thought please and thank you were passé, they're in vogue again. Emily Post would be pleased - etiquette is making a comeback.

Etiquette books and classes are turning up everywhere. "Whoopi's Big Book of Manners" (yes, Whoopi Goldberg (See related story) and "Emily's Everyday Manners" by Peggy Post (great-granddaughter-in-law of Emily Post) are two of the more popular titles.

It's a global movement. Starting next month, shopkeepers in Beijing, China, who vent their anger, act impatiently, glance at customers disdainfully or act absent-mindedly, are in violation of the law, according to a report released on a state media Web site. The municipal government hopes it will curb bad behavior during the 2008 Olympics.

Back in the U.S.A., manners effectively were tabled in the 1960s and 1970s when baby boomers got fed up with formality. Sunday dinners - the time when families honed the art of manners and conversation - went by the wayside in a fast-food society.

Many baby boomers didn't teach their children manners, Duke said. "Once the cycle started, there was no going back.

"Now we're so global in our interactions," she said. "We're communicating with people all over the world. We find ourselves at a disadvantage in business if we don't understand protocols involved."

Thomas Blaikie, author of "To the Manner Born: A Most Proper Guide to Modern Civility," says "manners need to be reinvented.

"To a lot of people, old-fashioned manners got very tangled up with the class system and became a way of excluding people from being ladies and gentlemen," he said. That's not the case any longer.

"Manners is about society and community," he noted. "We've all got to be responsible. ... Manners is what a whole society agrees on as what is a reasonable way to behave. In the end, a society gets the manners it deserves."

The three partners in the Protocol Consulting Group said they decided to ride the current wave by offering individual and group coaching on such topics as business, social and dining etiquette, government and international protocol, media appearances, appropriate attire, special events and high teas. One program is aimed at college grads and job seekers who wish to polish their presentation skills.

"We believe most young people have technical skills but not soft skills," said Donna Ulrich, a communications lecturer at the University of Michigan-Flint and one of the three partners. "There's appropriate behavior - whether you're at a cocktail (party) or on a job interview."

The new etiquette - in business or social arenas - is not about turning people into clones or snobs, the partners said.

In a social situation, "etiquette is about being so gracious that you'd never judge (your guests) verbally or nonverbally," Ulrich said. "Your goal (as a host) is to make them feel comfortable."

Even the lost art of writing a thank-you note is part of the training, said Michael Dach, the third partner in Protocol and president of the Phoenix Network in Grand Blanc. "It's still very appropriate to write a thank-you note (if you're invited to a party)."

Heidi Toler of Flint, a student in the Women in Education program at Mott Community College, said she benefited from a recent etiquette workshop offered by the Protocol Consulting Group at the college.

"I learned how much body language plays into first encounters with people," she said.

She also received instruction on how to conduct herself during a job interview. For instance, "a woman shouldn't cross her legs because it gives the signal that she's not serious," said Toler, who plans to study anthropology and sociology at the University of Michigan-Flint.

Julie Ward of Grand Blanc Township launched Manners Etc. two years ago after realizing that young people didn't know basic etiquette skills.