

Be on Your Best Holiday Behavior

By Colleen Rickenbacher

Michelle and her husband, Don, planned to attend her company's holiday party. It was her first year with the organization, and they were looking forward to making the best possible impression. Unfortunately, they made some serious mistakes. First, they forgot to RSVP, and Stephen, the host, and Michelle's regional manager, was forced to bring in additional seating to accommodate them. Second, Michelle and Don brought their hosts a gift of wine; however, they didn't realize that Stephen and his wife abstained due to their religious beliefs. At the end of the evening, Don ended up having too much to drink and accidentally spilled red wine on the carpet. Instead of getting off on the right foot, these mistakes damaged Michelle's reputation at the office. The key to success when attending any office function or event is preparation and planning. Here are some etiquette guidelines:

- * **Attending office parties** — You should attend. At the very least, make an appearance and find the host or hostess as soon as possible to extend your thanks for the invitation. Don't make an obvious exit, and never tell anyone you're leaving because you have another party to attend. It will give the impression the other party is better.
- * **When to arrive** — Get to your party or other engagement within 15 minutes of the designated start time. You don't have to be the first to arrive, but food or other plans may be geared around the starting and ending time of the event, so you never want to be overly late, either.
- * **Don't talk only about business** — Parties should be networking opportunities only. You may approach someone to set up a future meeting and exchange business cards, but leave it at that. Remember, people also love to talk about their families, hobbies, etc., not just work.
- * **Food and alcohol** — Drink and eat moderately. Continuously eating and drinking may mean you won't be invited again. The key is moderation. Your focus should be on talking and mingling, not seeing how much you can eat and drink.
- * **Buffets** — Along similar lines, avoid looking like a chowhound if the event involves a help-yourself buffet. You can go back again, but don't stack your plate so high you need help. If the entire table is going through the buffet line, try to start at the same time. Start eating when at least two or three people have returned to the table.
- * **Party gifts** — You should always bring a gift when invited to someone's home for the holidays, or any time of the year. The exception to this rule is if you have a weekly or monthly get together. Bring something that you know the host and hostess would enjoy. If you are not familiar with their home or décor, stay on the safe side with a bottle of wine (if they drink!), candles, or a small non-personal gift.
- * **Gift giving at the office** — Holiday gift giving can be tricky with various celebrations and religious beliefs. A nice card showing appreciation is always welcome — or give something homemade, like cookies. Another nice gesture is to get your co-workers to chip in together on a gift. Respect other traditions and religious beliefs. It doesn't mean you have to exclude people from holiday parties and gift giving, but give them the option whether they want to participate.

* **Client gift giving** — Be careful here, too. Your intention should be a gift they will enjoy and appreciate, not a lavish or outrageous gift that will “outdo” the competition. The gift should be sent to the office, and it should be business appropriate.

Summary

The morale of the story — always be on your best behavior, no matter what the situation. Understanding the proper ways to socialize will do more than build contacts — you just might make some of the most important connections of your career!

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