

Social Survival 101

-As the economy tightens, good manners might make the difference in a job interview or business encounter

By [Dan Mayfield](#)
Tribune Reporter

It was embarrassing to be part of - and just as painful to watch. Daniel Drennen was on his first overseas assignment as an intern with the U.S. State Department in 1999 when he attended a formal state dinner with then-Secretary of Commerce William Daley.

"There were, like, 14 pieces of silverware on the table," Drennen recalled. "Most of the Americans didn't know what to do. We all stared at each other, while the Germans picked up everything on cue."

Luckily, Drennen knew which fork went where and how to make conversation. But he recalls many of his American colleagues were clueless.

"I felt sorry for them," he said.

With an eye to his future, Drennen was one of 15 graduate and undergraduate business students at the University of New Mexico who took a new class this spring that taught them formal etiquette so they wouldn't make the kinds of mistakes that could ruin a job interview, a client meeting - or, maybe someday, a state dinner.

"This is going to be Social Survival 101," Thelma Domenici said of the classes, which will be taught again in fall.

"We're going to teach them how to behave, how they should dress and what to do when there's a whole lot of silverware on the table."

After years of what she calls a slow slide in manners, Domenici and UNM faculty members say the new "business formal" - the right attire, the correct manners, even the right handshake - is here to stay.

"I feel very strongly about this, and these are the sorts of skills that we're not teaching in schools. We've let these things slip in society," said Howard Smith, dean of the Anderson Schools of Management at UNM.

These skills are more important than ever, Smith says, as the economy tightens and job interviews are harder to get. Now, as the business school is inviting more national recruiters to visit the campus, it's the refinement of the candidates that could make the difference, he says.

"I don't want them saying, 'Gosh, I don't know what to do.' I want them to feel competent," he said.

Smith says he learned most of his etiquette skills as a young man when he went as a date to cotillion, or debutante, balls.

Now, however, students aren't taught these types of skills, and business leaders are lauding the class.

"It's about time," said Bob Hoffman, executive director of the Economic Forum, a group of business leaders that works on legislative and community issues. "Kids slam the door in your face, and they don't have manners anymore. It bugs the hell out of me."

But Hoffman says it's what's *not* done that bothers him so much. The common courtesies - holding doors open, wearing ties, firm handshakes and the right clothes for the right occasion - matter a lot and are practiced all too rarely, he and others say.

Social Survival 101 is an offshoot of Domenici's other etiquette endeavor - Aunt Thelma's School for Shy Girls, at which she teaches 10- to 12-year-old girls Old World graciousness.

But Social Survival 101 isn't all about table manners and fancy dresses. It's about interviewing, entertaining clients and knowing how to be comfortable with powerful people.

"Just because you have a Ph.D, CPA, MBA or all these wonderful initials behind your name, don't think you can walk in an organization and become a manager," she told the class.

In class, Domenici replaces the tender Aunt Thelma persona she uses with the young girls. Her cool, collected manners - she perfected the skills as an executive with health care companies in New Mexico and Arizona - are, yes, strictly business.

Her first class focused on getting hired, the second on good manners, the third on how to act once you are hired. The three-class series ended April 12.

Before the first class started, Domenici worked the room like her brother, a certain New Mexico politician named Pete Domenici. She shook hands with the entire class and introduced herself.

"Don't act afraid," she told the class. "Call me Ms. Domenici."

Then she laid into them.

"With a handshake you want a firm handshake - not a light handshake that says, 'You're bothering me,'" she said, subtly eying specific students in the class.

"Focus on your body language the very minute that you meet somebody. That first impression is lasting," she said.

Toward that end, she offered quick tips. Stand up straight. Listen. Make eye contact. Dress appropriately - suits for men, dresses for women.

"Don't think you have to dress conservative," said Domenici, who was wearing a simple brown and tan business suit. "Wear something that matches your personality."

"Wear very little makeup. Don't empty your jewelry box, either. And this goes for men too. Don't smell like a spring garden. These things are a total distraction."

And be on time.

"Take the time to be comfortable and be yourself. That means five minutes early," she said.

For the second class, she brought table place settings and showed the students how to eat.

"I've seen so many people mess up a simple dinner," Domenici said.

It's precisely that kind of error that worries students like Drennen, who is an MBA student hoping to go into international business.

"I've already learned a considerable amount after one session," Drennen said. "Good etiquette helps prevent a potential opportunity from slipping away."

"Do not give anyone a chance to dismiss you simply on the basis of improper attire or conversation," he continued.

"There will always be someone waiting behind you to capitalize on your missed opportunity."

Pass the Salt First

-Etiquette instructor Thelma Domenici has a long list of do's and don'ts for eating in public. These are just few items business people - or anyone - should remember from the lists of Domenici and her assistant, Linley Daly.

Don't talk with food in your mouth.

Don't reach across the table.

Don't talk with food in your mouth.

Don't drink wine at lunch.

Don't put bread on the tablecloth; put it on the plate.

Don't talk with food in your mouth.

"The host should always order first," Domenici said. "The host should be aware of the menu and give their credit card before it starts so they can pay discretely."

One of the big mistakes eager young executives make is to start eating as soon as food arrives. Slow down. Wait for everybody to be served. Then start eating with the silverware on the outside and move in.

Don't talk with food in your mouth.

Fluids go to the right of your plate; food on the left.

Sorry, white wine lovers. Try to stick to red and *only* at dinner.

One way to look as though you know what you're doing is to fold a napkin in half and then put the folded side toward your waist. That way, when you have to use it to cover your mouth and remove spinach from your teeth, it's ready.

Always pass salt and pepper together, but the salt goes first.

Don't talk with food in your mouth.

Etiquette Books

-Etiquette is spreading to the best sellers' list. Here's a partial list:

"Emily Post's: The Etiquette Advantage in Business: Personal Skills for Professional Success," Peggy Post, 1999.

"Letitia Baldrige's New Complete Guide to Executive Manners," Letitia Baldrige, 1993.

"Miss Manners' Basic Training: The Right Thing to Say," Judith Martin, 1998.

"Emily Post's Etiquette," 16th edition, Peggy Post, 1997.

"Emily Post's Entertaining," Peggy Post, 1998.