



March 1, 2009

Doggy bag not a good idea at business lunch

Question: My New Year's resolution is to lose weight, and I am using Weight Watcher's to help me. For my job, I often take clients or prospective clients out to lunch or dinner. This makes adhering to my diet a little difficult. Is it appropriate to get a doggy bag?

Answer: Asking for a doggy bag or to-go bag can be a tricky proposition.

The purpose of the meal is to build a relationship with the client and cultivate business, and less about the food itself. My recommendation for you would be to establish relationships with a couple of different restaurants and patronize them as much as possible. Introduce yourself to the owner, manager or maitre d'. If you develop a relationship with the restaurant, it will be much easier for you to make special requests.

Arrive at the restaurant a few minutes early and let the owner, manager or maitre d' know that you are going to eat a portion of your meal and that you would like the rest boxed.

Once the meeting is over and you have walked your guest to the door, you can then pick up your to-go box and no one will be the wiser.

Who pays for the meal?

Q: How do I know who will pay for the business meal?

A: Protocol calls for the person who did the inviting to pay for the meal; however, it can be quite awkward when the check arrives and no one reaches for the tab.

If you were the inviter, I suggest that you arrive early to the restaurant, preferably to a restaurant where you are well-known, and give them your credit card ahead of time. This simple step alleviates the whole "who should pay?" awkward moment. This is the height of professionalism and sophistication.

Business meetings over a meal are not something to be taken lightly and if there is ever any doubt or an awkward moment over the bill, pick up the tab and take care of it. You want to avoid at all costs the unprofessional and uncomfortable discussion of who should pay and the "my portion is such-and-such amount and you owe the rest" conversation.

If you invited, pay. If there is an uncomfortable moment, pay. When in doubt, pay.

A lot of important business is conducted over meals, and I do not foresee that changing any time soon. What has changed, due to the recession, is the meal in which the meeting occurs. Studies show that more power meetings are taking place over breakfast than lunch or dinner. Why? Breakfast is a heck of a lot cheaper than any other meal. It is better to conduct meetings over breakfast than to feel the discomfort of who should pick up the tab of lunch or dinner.

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