work it, baby

If you want to make it career-wise these days you've got to network and schmooze with the best of them. But what if you don't know how? By consultant **Sue Currie**.

These days, cocktail parties, networking, and business lunches are becoming an increasingly important part of our working life. Being at ease in these situations and behaving in the most appropriate manner doesn't always come easily to everyone. If you're looking to get ahead in your career it pays to perfect your social skills. The way we present ourselves, especially in social situations, says a lot about us. If we bumble through introductions at a networking event we may come across as insecure or lacking in confidence. Dodgy table manners could raise the eyebrows of the all-important client you're trying to do business with. And having a few too many drinks at a work function mightn't be such a good idea, especially if you relax so much you end up telling the boss or client what you really think of them.

Many of us are busily attending functions, meetings and social events to woo and win clients and customers. To further our careers we've learned sales and negotiating skills, proposal writing, technology skills, marketing, public relations and a host of other tools to help us in our business life. But what about the softer skills or the intangible elements of the work relationship that may help us land the deal.

too shy

Lea-Anne Brighton, Melbourne based CEO of the Micro Business Network a network for small and home based business people says "I'm constantly amazed that members at our mixer events don't know how to introduce themselves properly, they're too scared".

"They spend thousands on marketing their businesses but are notorious for not knowing how to network properly or even interact socially," says Brighton.

Social interaction such as handshakes and introductions can be confusing especially if you didn't learn the basics at home or school. In days of old we may have practised good table manners around the dining room table as we were growing up, but with our modern take-away, fast food lifestyle, some of our earlier learning may have gone out the window. So let's look at a few do's and don'ts for acceptable behaviour at a flash business lunch.

table talk

If you're taking a client to lunch you pay – the one who is likely to benefit the most from the business should pay. Leave your credit card with the cashier beforehand or politely excuse yourself before the end of the meal and settle the bill.

Shaking hands is the accepted greeting. If it's a male/female lunch avoid the kiss on the cheek unless you know each other very well. It's best to keep the relationship business-like.

Recommend the restaurant and book a table in a good position – away from the kitchen or restrooms. Have the client in the best seat facing into the restaurant or toward the view.

If you've been to the restaurant before, suggest items on the menu, possibly something more expensive so they'll feel comfortable with their choice. Be guided by them. For example don't order dessert if they're not having it and then expect them to wait while you finish off a piece of chocolate cake.

Don't get drunk or drink too much and don't smoke if your client doesn't.

Don't wave your knife and fork around like a conductor, or use the wrong utensils. The basic rule is work from the outside in. Your bread and butter plate will be on the left while your wineglass will be on the right near the tip of your knife. Observe basic good manners – such as not talking with your mouth full.

Start the lunch off with some small talk first, so read the papers for a few days beforehand and make sure you're up with the latest news. Although you are there to discuss business, don't bring it up before eating the entree.

let's do lunch

The idea of a business lunch is to build rapport and a relationship with your client. It's not so much about the food or wine but more about making them feel happy and comfortable with the time they've spent with you – people like to do business with people they like and trust. One other successful method of meeting people and building business contacts is networking – regularly meeting up with contacts to catch up.

Sue Henry, Sydney-based business consultant and co-author of Network or Perish, (Sea Change Publishing), says, "With the ease of technology, sometimes we rely on email too much to build relationships for us. There's no real substitute for being in front of somebody. We learn so much more about other people face to face.

"There are many ways of networking. It can be lunch, dinner or even a coffee. I have one client in Melbourne who I meet with regularly and I take sandwiches into their office. There's no golden rule to networking. It's really about doing business in a way that makes both you and your customer or client comfortable."

Networking events and cocktail parties are another area where etiquette and good manners need to be observed. Do you rush straight to the bar or chase the waiter around grabbing at the spring rolls on offer? Had one too many drinks at the company's product night? Maybe it's time to rethink some of these social mistakes or at least be aware of what is acceptable social behaviour.

social butterflies

The most important point about attending networking functions is that you're there to meet people and make effective contacts. You won't do that if you spend your time flitting around the room from person to person or spending all your time with people you know or ,worse, standing in a corner because you feel uncomfortable being there.

Journalist Leanne Philpott of Sydney says, "Working in the beauty industry involves attending lots of product