

Professional business behaviour

It's not just a great idea that creates a successful business – how you behave makes a difference too. Everyone who comes in contact with your business – customers, suppliers, even your bank manager – will make decisions partly based on how you come across.

Communicating

The way you talk to people and the type of language you use can have a major impact on whether people take your ideas and business proposals seriously. Also, getting your ideas across clearly and effectively is essential when starting a business.

Whether you are writing a letter to a business adviser or talking to a supplier for the first time, here are some things to bear in mind to make sure you come across well.

Speaking

- speak clearly, in a calm and polite manner
- make and hold eye contact with the person you're talking to
- try not to fidget with your hair or clothes
- don't use slang words that other people may not understand or swear words that may cause offence

Writing

- use a standard business format for your letters (see example Spark Lighting letter).
- if you start with a person's name, for example 'Dear Mr Smith', end the letter with 'Yours sincerely'. If you don't know the person's name use 'Dear Sir/Madam' and end with 'Yours faithfully'.
- check that the letter is addressed to the right person with their name and address spelt correctly.
- keep your language formal and sentences clear and to the point, without being impolite.
- use the spelling and grammar check on your computer. If you don't have a computer, check any words you're not sure of in the dictionary.
- ask a friend, mentor or someone you trust to proofread your first few letters.
- keep a photocopy of important letters you send for future reference.

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Mr H Smith
2 Marlow Street
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SW11 3TK

5 February 2006


Dear Mr Smith,

Re: Fluorescent Lighting Order

In response to your letter dated 28 January 2006, I am writing to....
[Continue with the main text of your letter].

If you require any further information, feel free to contact me.

Yours sincerely



Lee Hill

Meeting people

When you've arranged to meet someone, whether it's a business adviser, customer or supplier, it's important to present yourself in a professional manner. Here are some things to remember:

- **agenda** – prepare a list of topics that need to be discussed in the meeting
- **punctuality** – be on time, or even a few minutes early
- **personal presentation** – dress smartly and make sure you look groomed
- **professional behaviour** – shake hands, make eye contact and be polite
- **sell yourself** – be confident and prepared
- **follow up** – make notes about what was discussed and make sure you stick to any deadlines agreed

Agenda

Before a meeting it's a good idea to make sure everybody knows what will be discussed and so they can come to the meeting prepared. The best way to do this is to put together a short list of topics, known as an agenda, and distribute it beforehand.

The person running the meeting then focuses the meeting around the agenda and makes sure the meeting is kept as short as possible.

Punctuality

It's essential to be on time for meetings or appointments. The person you want to see may be busy and if you're late they will think you're unreliable. Here are some tips to help you be on time, every time:

- check where you're going. Look at a map or visit www.multimap.com.
- plan your journey the day before. If you need to catch a bus, look up timetables <http://timetables.showbus.co.uk> or call 0870 6082608. If you need to catch a train, look up timetables on www.nationalrail.co.uk/planmyjourney or call 0845 7484950. Plan an alternative so that you're prepared if there's a delay - for example, take enough money for a taxi and the number of a reliable local taxi firm.
- if you're very early for your appointment – 10 minutes or more – kill some time looking in the windows of local shops or wait outside. The person you want to see may have other clients or might feel uncomfortable about keeping you waiting.

→ if you're going to be late, let the person you are meeting know. Phone them as soon as you get the chance and let them know when you're likely to get there. Give them the option of seeing you when you arrive or rescheduling the appointment for another time or day.

Personal presentation

Most people judge your reliability and professionalism within the first ten seconds of meeting you. Big decisions can be made simply on appearances. Here are some ideas for putting your best foot forward:

- dress professionally - a smart pair of trousers with a clean, ironed shirt for men; smart trousers or a skirt with a crisp shirt or top for women. Wear smart shoes, in a dark colour, and make sure they are clean and polished.
- look smart and well groomed - keep make-up and jewellery to a bare minimum. The same goes for nail polish – if it's chipped or badly applied, take it off.
- avoid wearing strong perfume or aftershave – it can be overpowering. Similarly, some people find the smell of smoke off-putting so try not to have a cigarette just before your meeting.

Professional behaviour

Having good manners and following standard business etiquette when conducting or attending business meetings is just as important as looking good. Remember to:

- introduce yourself clearly
- shake hands with everyone attending the meeting
- say please and thank you if you are offered a drink or other refreshments
- smile and look interested in what other people have to say
- make eye contact with the person who is speaking to you
- try not to interrupt
- not slouch or fidget

Following these basic rules will help you come across as confident and professional. It will also reassure potential business partners, customers and suppliers that they want to do business with you.

Sell yourself

Confidence and enthusiasm are the secrets to success in business. Here are some tips to help you strike a balance between appearing confident and being seen as arrogant:

- be prepared - find out how many people will be attending the meeting and practise what you will say.
- speak with enthusiasm about your business.
- when asked a question, give as full an answer as you can.
- don't be afraid to ask questions if you don't understand something.
- when you are listening to someone, nod your head every so often to show you are interested.
- the way you hold yourself is important. If you stand up straight people will respond better to you and you will appear more confident.

Follow up

During or after a meeting it's a good idea to make notes about what was discussed. This can be particularly useful when you need to refresh your memory at a later date - for example, when you meet with the same person again.

If you agreed on any deadlines at the meeting, make sure you follow these up as soon as possible. Why not follow up with an email, letter or phone call to thank the person for the meeting and get feedback?

In certain cases (particularly if you've set up a limited company) you may need to write up formal minutes. Minutes are the written record of what everybody says during a meeting. They don't have to be a word-for-word account, but should include the main points. After the meeting they should be copied and given to everybody involved.

Networking

Networking is a useful way of building up contacts within businesses and organisations that can help you in your own business. You can network with others in your industry at trade shows and trade association meetings, or with people who can provide advice and information at regional business association meetings.

People often think that networking is simply about selling your products or services. But effective networking is really about developing good working business relationships and finding answers to common business problems.

Going to a networking event on your own for the first time can be a bit daunting, but here are some ways to help you stay confident and network effectively:

- if you're on your own, find someone else who is not talking to anyone and introduce yourself. If everyone is in groups, look for a group of people you would like to talk to and join in or ask the event organiser to introduce you.
- don't interrupt if people are deep in conversation – wait for a break to introduce yourself. Introduce yourself to everyone in the group with a smile and a firm handshake. Wear your name badge on the right lapel as it's easier to see when you're introducing yourself.
- try to find some common business ground with the group. Ask people what they do and about their interests. You may find you are able to ask these people for advice on a problem you are having or help them with a useful contact.
- at the end of the conversation, exchange business cards and shake hands with the people you've met.
- after the event write notes on the back of business cards to remember the conversations you've had.
- follow up with the contacts you think could be valuable in the future - for example, by sending an article which you think they might find interesting.






Time management

Managing your time is tricky when you're running a business and the only way to make sure you get things done is to learn how to prioritise and stick to your planned work activity.

It's a good idea to keep track of meetings and to-do lists in a standard day-to-a-page diary, which you can buy in high street stationery shops. Each day make a list of the things you need to do, in order of which is most important. Do the tasks in order - don't abandon a more important task to do something that you'd prefer to do - and cross them off your list as you complete them.

Another important thing to bear in mind is limiting possible distractions. For example, if continually arriving emails take your attention away from your work, make it a habit to only open your email program twice a day, first thing in the morning and last thing in the evening.

Top tips

-  Get a friend, family member or mentor to proofread your business documents.
-  When meeting someone for the first time, try to remember their name.
-  If you're nervous before a meeting, sit quietly when you arrive and take a few deep breaths to calm yourself.
-  If you aren't sure about something, don't be afraid to ask questions. It can show that you are interested in what the person has to say.
-  If the meeting doesn't go as planned, ask yourself why and try to think of ways you can improve next time. It may be as simple as maintaining eye contact and smiling more.

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