

## **GETTING PERSONAL: Dining Lessons For The Corporate World**

7 April 2005 | 12:15 | Dow Jones News Service | English  
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13 April 2005 | Wall Street Journal

By Colleen DeBaise  
A Dow Jones Newswires Column

NEW YORK (Dow Jones)--Inside a tiny banquet room with sunset views of a New Jersey highway, a group of Rutgers University students are eating cream of asparagus soup - slowly and carefully.

A hand goes up. "Can you dip the bread in your soup?" a young male student asks.

"No," says the instructor, Douglas Ricci, an assistant director of career services at Rutgers. "That's reserved for home."

While good manners have never been out of style, dining etiquette is making a comeback from the go-go days of the late 90s. Protocol slipped during that period, but the ensuing economic downturn and tough job market prompted a return to formality, etiquette experts say. As a result, lessons on which fork to use are on the rise at universities and big companies.

Potential employers don't want to see a job candidate fumbling for the correct bread plate or water glass. Corporations, especially financial-services firms whose success relies on trust and credibility, don't want employees blowing noses with napkins or eating filet mignon with fingers.

"Dining etiquette is becoming increasingly asked for," says Pamela Holland, a Jenkintown, Pa., business communications consultant and co-author of "Help! Was That A Career Limiting Move." "The pendulum started swinging back to an appreciation and respect for people's business behavior."

Rutgers began etiquette lessons in 1999 at the request of corporations, who complained that graduates were well-prepared in terms of technical skills but lacking in ability to conduct business socially. Prudential Financial Inc. (PRU), Johnson & Johnson (JNJ) and L'Oreal SA (12032.FR) have all sponsored workshops on the New Brunswick, N.J., campus.

Young people who have grown up eating in front of the television, in the car or at soccer practice often need lessons, says Danielle Turcola, president of

Professionalism International Inc., a Twinsburg, Ohio, consulting firm whose clients have included General Electric Co. (GE), Hewlett-Packard Co. (HPQ) and Deloitte & Touche LLP.

"Dining etiquette is the most scrutinized aspect of all business etiquette," says Turcola, who finds herself training executives who dislodge food in their teeth with their fingers while sitting at the table or hold forks like shovels.

Particularly in the financial, legal and medical professions, consumers expect the service provider to "know more, to look better, to dress better, to act better and to speak better than they do," she says.

Turcola often trains financial planners and accountants on how to meet with clients over the dining table. "They're going to be receiving large sums of money from someone in exchange for services," she says. "Whenever large sums of money transfer, people expect more from the person."

**Michelle T. Sterling, a former investment banker with Bank of America Corp.'s (BAC) Banc of America Securities, now teaches dining etiquette and protocol skills through her firm Global Image Group in New York. She says junior-level employees do less talking than the boss at business lunches and dinners, so they need to make sure their dining skills stand out.**

**"It talks more about your social-class level, and it speaks to how you conduct yourself as a professional," she says. "Even if you go to an Ivy League school, there are people there who have atrocious dining skills."**

Holland, the business-communications consultant, says companies sometimes ask for a lunch workshop because "they have employees who have just embarrassed themselves or the organization." And often, "employees acknowledge because they don't know the rules of etiquette they get preoccupied and worried (while dining), and their ability to concentrate on the business at hand is compromised."

At the Rutgers banquet, Ricci the instructor gives a lesson on eating a garden salad studded with cherry tomatoes before the main entree of basil-marinated chicken is served. "Cherry tomatoes are a real challenge," he says, to laughter. "My advice is: don't eat the cherry tomatoes." A gasp goes up from the crowd at the concept.

Rui Li, a 22-year-old accounting major originally from China, says she wants to beef up her American dining skills because she wants a job as an external or internal auditor.

"You've got to meet a lot of people outside the company; you're probably going to have dinner with the CEOs or managers," says Li, who admits spending most nights in the dorm with friends, eating food with chopsticks. "You have to know how to deal with those situations."

(Colleen DeBaise is one of four Getting Personal columnists who write about personal-finance issues ranging from new tax proposals to education-funding strategies to estate planning.)

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