

## FT Globetrotter New York City travel

Holly Peterson in New York MARCH 4 2020

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Attempting to decipher proper etiquette in New York City, business or social, is like wrestling an alligator. This concrete jungle is like no other: you have cultures clashing, heated race relations, even religious backgrounds that don't always meld well. Before you enter this world, then, here are some basic guidelines.

New Yorkers start their day prepped for combat. A cab driver will hurl profanities at you merely for taking the standard 11 seconds to get in a taxi. And God help you if you are not paying attention at a deli when it's your turn to order in what is the fastest coffee and bagel delivery system on the planet.

Likewise, New Yorkers are ready for battle when they arrive at work. Bankers get in early, many by 8am, most having had a 6am session with a personal trainer. Media, arts and fashion usually get in by 10am.

Dilly-dallying is not a trait New Yorkers are familiar with. When we arrive at work, if we aren't barking on calls and tapping our keyboards within minutes, we are reading reports and busily preparing files and documents for the day's meetings.

In short, New Yorkers are efficient and direct. We get to the point. We don't waver. We joke a little more, get comfortable a little faster, share personal stories that shock many Europeans. My British and French friends mock the easy intimacy Americans often create and consider it without solid foundation. I say they don't get it and are too uptight.

## Greetings



Europeans may air kiss *deux fois*, but Americans shake hands in business meetings (at least, they did, pre-Coronavirus) or nod and smile on a first greeting at cocktails. At a second office meeting, not even a quick kiss is in order, unless it's a very friendly relationship you count on having with your boss or colleagues. In a negotiation or any situation that is even slightly adversarial, keep it formal.

If you're a man in this #MeToo era, do not go into business meetings kissing the women and shaking hands with the men. In a social situation, if they have mutual

friends and are greeting the first time, New York men and women might go for a light hug and a pat on the back, even before a kiss. Possibly they'd do both, but no American kisses *deux fois* unless they are trying to impress the snooty greeter at a hot French lunch spot.

## Meetings



At a business meeting, be ready to wrestle that alligator by getting to your point after the initial pleasantries. Make clear what you want to achieve, what you hope to give to and get out of a deal. Bankers, lawyers, publishers, art dealers and the like in this city don't pussyfoot around, nor do they respect anyone who does.

List your talking points in advance and lay them out clearly in the meeting, or you'll be eaten alive, crunched in the jaws of New Yorkers primed to pounce since they got out of bed.

Unless you are a bona fide member of a hip art scene, dress crisply. A tie doesn't really matter outside of banking and law, but "neat and professional" means your outfit should show you mean business. Women should go for tailored, stylish lines. Same for the men: go for well-appointed, well-ironed slacks, jacket and shirt. Avoid bright colours unless you are chic enough to pair a divine lavender cashmere with the plaid in your blazer. Clothing should never distract from the critical points you are hoping to convey.

## **Professional socialising**

Meetings that roll into dinner can mean one of two things: either you haven't finalised the deal or your clients or associates believe it would be friendly and useful for everyone get to know each other out of the office. If they mean to talk shop, stay in your professional attire. If they intend to welcome you into their world, change but keep the outfit appropriate for an office meeting.

New Yorkers do not drink late at night — they are too busy proving how hard they work. In smart European circles, a sweaty work ethic often means you are trying too hard: people whisper that something may be off with you if your success doesn't come easily. In New York, working as hard as you can is a sign of achievement.

Drinks with colleagues in New York often only happen on a Friday, or you might go to a hotel lounge for a nightcap. There are few bars or clubs in the after-dinner hours that aren't deafening dating environments. Grown-up New Yorkers on business don't go out much after dinner anyway and, if they do, they are probably interested in something other than the professional issues at hand.

## **What to bring to a dinner party**

The most gracious option for a dinner-party gift is a small bouquet of flowers, delivered early on the day of the party. Go for an arrangement your host might put on the hall table, not a blooming extravaganza that feels too expensive or difficult to place.

If you've forgotten to call for flowers, bring a bottle of white or red wine in the \$30-\$50 range at most. A \$100 Margaux is a little showy and can't be easily shared or

opened that night as it might eclipse the wines served. Champagne is a little more fun and good for holidays. Buy a bag from the shop to place it in and include a note.

## What to discuss at a social dinner



Europeans have very different rules on what to talk about at a social cocktail or dinner. They pride themselves on lacing literary witticisms into conversations and are practised in the art of verbal sparring and amusing self-deprecation.

But Baudelaire and Byron won't get you far in the more kinetic, impatient New York. Likewise, you won't get much play if you mention something you have read off the Prix Goncourt shortlist or that Antony Gormley show you saw lately.

New Yorkers are happy if you enjoy yourself, but they find cultural name-dropping a little pretentious and, frankly, a facile way to present your vast knowledge.

But some New Yorkers do preen by name-dropping, boasting about where they've been and what they've achieved. The better conversationalists won't do that . . . much — their stories are meant to inform and incite responses. In turn, they want to know what you are passionate about, what you are working on. It's far more fun to discuss what really turns you on about your work.

Asking someone what they do for a living at the start of a conversation is not as crass as many Europeans think. Don't talk about the details of a deal few at the table can comprehend; do discuss how you got into your field, why it interests you, and tell people how you operate differently in your country only if it is useful to others.

Dinner talk should be like a tennis rally. Whether you are launching a killer point or an easy lob, you shouldn't be talking about yourself much at all. Exchange ideas that build on each other. Reference yourself sparingly: "I started off working in a museum, in the days when an exhibition was easier to digest, but don't you find the arts these days are so . . .?" works well. Offer a starting point for someone to ponder.

Of course, if you are with a host or boss who loves to hear themselves speak, and you want to win them over, go ahead, fall on your sword and throw questions at them about themselves. We all know those people who go on about themselves all night, don't ask you one question, then leave saying, "That was a fascinating discussion!"

## **Correspondence**

In this age of social media and email blasts, nothing shows off your manners more than a handwritten thank-you note. In New York, it should accompany a thoughtful email sent immediately after the dinner, announcing you had a lovely time and that, of course, a note is on the way.

If you are in a rush and can't find a stamp — although that is a lame excuse as a hotel concierge will have one — write a longer email the next day about why you had a lovely time. To show your top manners and return the generosity, send flowers the day after the dinner. No host will frown at that.

After a meeting, acknowledge the successes achieved — never later than the following day. New Yorkers tend to sign off an email with "All my best," or "Best,". Save

“Sincerely” for a real document. Don’t say, “So sorry I’m late in thanking you . . .” All that says is you had more important things to do than show basic manners.

*Have we missed something out? Share your tips on good business and social etiquette in New York in the comments below*

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*Illustrations by Harry Haysom*

## About the author

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In addition to contributing to FT Globetrotter, Holly writes a column analysing and sometimes satirising the ways of the one-percenters. Her travels as an ABC News Producer and a Newsweek Editor have jettisoned her to far-flung locales from Dayton to Dharan. Yet, while at home in her native New York City, she now lives across the street from where she grew up on the Upper East Side. She likes to write with background noise, and so she has become an expert in the hippest hotel lobbies and afternoon coffee shops. Her reward for a day delivering plentiful pages? A vodka martini, always Grey Goose, always straight up. She knows the best hidden spots to get one of those too.