The rebirth of high tea: Mastering the Zen of business etiquette

By Johnica B. Aherrera

On November 30, the CPRS (Toronto) Student Steering Committee invited PR students and junior PR practitioners to gather in one of the stately dining rooms of the University of Toronto Faculty Club. Never out of style, attendees learned that proper etiquette does not have to pertain solely to the dinner table. It can also be used in business settings to effectively “Get Your Foot in the Door.”

At the event, Sheila Corriveau, former President, CEO and Partner of Porter Novelli Canada, focused on the importance of polished networking skills to her success. She offered insightful and practical tips on the basics of launching one’s career: the résumé, the cover letter, the portfolio, the networking follow-through and the interview. “In every situation in life, there are certainly pros and cons to consider when looking at a PR career from various sectors – from agency, to corporate, and non-profit,” says Corriveau.

During the course of her presentation, Corriveau encouraged participants to get creative with résumés and seek avenues to further build contacts and a portfolio. “Participation in association events are excellent venues to trade your business cards, strike a conversation, and build grounds for a fruitful business relationship,” says Corriveau. She highlighted the benefits of volunteering as key in developing contacts in the industry. “In fact, I landed my job at Porter Novelli Canada because I attended an association Munch and Mingle and met a senior PR practitioner who recommended me to my boss,” Corriveau adds.

Carrying on the tutelage of professional development, Leanne Pepper stood by the lectern with her weapons of choice on hand: a plate, cutlery, and a guiding voice to our formal dining exercise. Leanne Pepper, a certified business etiquette and protocol consultant, and General Manager of the University of Toronto Faculty Club, was leading the session’s “etiquette boot camp” that would help us distinguish foie gras from faux pas. Why the brush up on social graces? More than passing fancy, good manners have always been the icing on the cake in terms of effectively delivering communications to a client.

Under crystal chandeliers, on a table of exquisite linens and fine china, Pepper instructed attendees on the positions and timely use of cutlery and the differences between the American and Continental styles. While gently correcting misplaced finishing positions, she continued to answer questions from the novice etiquette crew. “Many decisions are made at social events,” says Pepper, “so knowing how to be comfortable in those environments is essential so you can put the business of which fork to use behind you, and focus on your pitch to the client.”

As the last few bites of dessert and sips of espresso were savoured, participants began to reflect on the activities of the evening. Proper etiquette plays a large role in effective networking, because good manners go far beyond the dinner table. They also transcend into the everyday lives of students in classrooms and PR professionals in offices.

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