



Holiday Etiquette Survival Guide

Westchester etiquette expert Melissa Leonard answers our questions on navigating the holiday party and gift-giving season with co-workers, clients, and bosses.

BY AMY R.
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The holidays are a festive time—but one that can bring about some stressful etiquette questions for businesspeople. What to wear to the office holiday party? Can I boast to the boss over those free cocktails? How do I decline an invitation to a client's party? For the answers to these, and other questions, read on for advice from Establish Yourself NY's Melissa Leonard, Westchester's top etiquette and protocol expert:

As businesspeople, we often get invited to numerous holiday parties. In addition to our own company parties there are parties thrown by our clients, potential or perspective clients, industry groups,

networking affiliates, etc. Which ones are we obliged to go to, and which ones can we skip?

'Tis the season....for holiday parties! This time of year is busy enough and then the invitations for holiday parties start to rack up. Naturally, you should always attend your own company holiday-fest, as this is a time to celebrate all of your hard work throughout the year and be with colleagues in a festive setting. Extreme and sudden situations (sickness, family emergencies, etc.) are reasons to have to decline last minute, but the rule of thumb is to always attend your own company party.

As for the other invites—parties for clients, networking groups, etc—you need not fret if you can't attend or just don't have the time during the hustle and bustle of December. It is best to keep it short and sweet. Prepare a line or two that doesn't leave too much room for further questions and inquiries. Don't falter and leave it open ended. And don't feign illnesses that don't exist. Simply say, "I was so touched (or thrilled) by the invitation to the party, but unfortunately I won't be able to attend as I have something on the calendar that day/evening." Yes, the plans may be snuggling up and watching your favorite show in your pajamas, but no one needs to know that. Naturally, if you want to attend one party over another, that is perfectly fine and you are able to pick and choose which ones you decide to attend.

If you can't attend a holiday party, what's the best way to let the organizer know? And what's the timing? (Ie, do you need to respond within days, by the RSVP date, can you respond after that date, etc?)

If someone takes the time to invite you to a party, whether it be by email, by phone, paper invitation or Evite, you should always respond in a timely manner. Don't make the hosts hunt you down, as people rarely forget those "rude" individuals. I always think it is gracious and polite to call the host and decline the invitation. This can be daunting and you may start throwing excuses out there and dig yourself into a hole, so again, keep it short and to the point. The RSVP date is there for a reason, and no one should ever contact to decline AFTER that date, unless there is an unexpected change in plans. When you receive an invitation, respond as soon as you know if you can or cannot attend. The earlier the better, as this gives the host more time to prepare and perhaps invite someone else if there was a limit to invitees. If you, for some reason, forget to contact them by the RSVP date, you should immediately call and extend your sincerest apologies. And the ever-gracious guest goes beyond, and perhaps sends a bottle of wine with a note to apologize for their faux pas.



Melissa

Leonard. Provided photo.

At a corporate party, what are some of the typical etiquette rules—and which rules do people break most often?

Holiday office parties can be like navigating a mine field for those ready to party. Here are some do's and don'ts and the most common ones people break...

1. Be on time! Don't try and be fashionably late...it's rude!
2. Dress appropriately—be aware of the dress code and don't go below that bar. You can definitely go up a notch or two, but never below. And don't be the "one" everyone is talking about the next day...if you catch my drift
3. Don't get drunk—this is the biggest rule that is broken! Naturally, this is a festive time where colleagues are celebrating and "letting loose" as we say, but don't get too loose, as over imbibing loosens your tongue and inhibitions and you will cringe the next morning.
4. Be prepared to make introductions—If a significant other, spouse, or guest attends with you, make sure they are briefed on who is who, so they can be prepared to

make you look like a superstar. And don't forget to introduce them to your colleagues. There is nothing worse than watching a dud who can't be bothered to introduce or ignores their guest.

5. Don't gossip with colleagues—This is a party, but it is still an office function, so do not gossip or badmouth others. Again, people are drinking and it will get around, as saying "don't tell anyone" never works...especially at work.

6. One thing most guests forget to do is to thank the hosts when they arrive and when they leave. This is common courtesy and will make a good impression on those who took the time to plan your office party

7. Don't flirt!—This is another common rule people break! You may think you have found the love of your life, but keep it professional as this is not the time or place to flirt. Don't let liquid courage take over. Be friendly, but no flirting...especially with the bosses wife or boss! No matter how others behave toward you, you be that lady or gentleman and you will be glad you did in the long run.

8. Social Media No No— Keep your phones in your pockets, as this is a time to interact with others, not with your 1,000 Facebook or Snapchat friends. You were invited to the party because you have something to add, not so you can glaze over posting on your account. Of course, you can take a photo here and there, but keep photos from the party off of your social media, unless you are given permission from all people in the photo.

What about the dress code—if an invitation doesn't specify, what are some safe-bet outfits?

If the invitation doesn't specify the dress code, you may want to assume it is work- appropriate clothing. Don't wear anything too short, too tight, too low cut! Since this is a holiday party and it only happens once a year, you can bring it up a notch and add some sparkly jewelry, fun earrings, festive tie or holiday socks (for the men). Of course, you can also ask those organizing the party what the dress code is, but if that doesn't pan out, remember it is still a business event, so treat it as such.

Any etiquette rules about trying to land new contacts or clients/impress a boss, etc., at a holiday party?

Nothing is wrong with trying to make a great impression at the office party, but don't go overboard. This may be the only time of the year that you are in front of certain executives or clients, so be on your A-game. This may be your time to shine, so why not take advantage of it? With that in mind, you also do not want to be a stalker or a gadfly. Don't overstay your welcome when talking with one of the bosses or clients. Be polite, engaging, and know how to make small talk so the conversation isn't stilted and awkward. Have a list in your head of conversation starters, appropriate jokes, etc. And remember, this is a holiday party not a business meeting and it is a time for friendly lighthearted banter. Have business cards in your pocket should anyone ask for them. Be that person that others gravitate to and you will be sure to make a lasting impression on those you are trying to impress.

What about office holiday gift exchanges—any do's or don'ts there?

Many people get into trouble with the Secret Santa or holiday gift exchange. Rule of thumb is to keep it clean. Sexy lingerie or dirty gifts may seem funny at the moment you buy them, but that is all it is...a funny thought that shouldn't go any further. Buy a tasteful gift that can't be construed as sexual. You certainly don't want a call from HR! First off, keep it within the budget limit you have been given. Often times there is a \$20 or \$30 dollar gift limit. Avoid gift cards as that is quite impersonal. If you know someone's favorite alcoholic beverage, buy that. If you know someone likes to cook, go to William Sonoma or a gourmet store and buy some off-the-beaten-path spice rubs. If someone wears colorful socks, run to Nordstrom Rack and add to their collection. Many people try to avoid perfume or jewelry, as then the person feels obligated to wear it. Find a colleague who knows them well, and do some investigating to what their hobbies are, likes and dislikes.

Any other tips for businesspeople to get through the holiday season without any embarrassing faux-pas?

1. Buy a small stash of Starbucks gift cards and keep them in your desk. If someone unexpectedly stops by and gives you a thank-you gift (and you totally forgot to get them something) you can say "I'm so glad you came by as I had a little something for you as well!" Remember the 5 P's: Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance. When you are ever prepared for anything that comes your way, you have the confidence to meet awkward situations head on.
2. Be moderate—the holidays are a time for fun and parties, so make moderation your mantra. Be moderate in how much you drink, how much you share and say, how you dress, and how you behave. You don't want this year's New Year's resolution to be "don't get myself into trouble like last year!"

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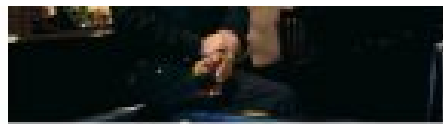
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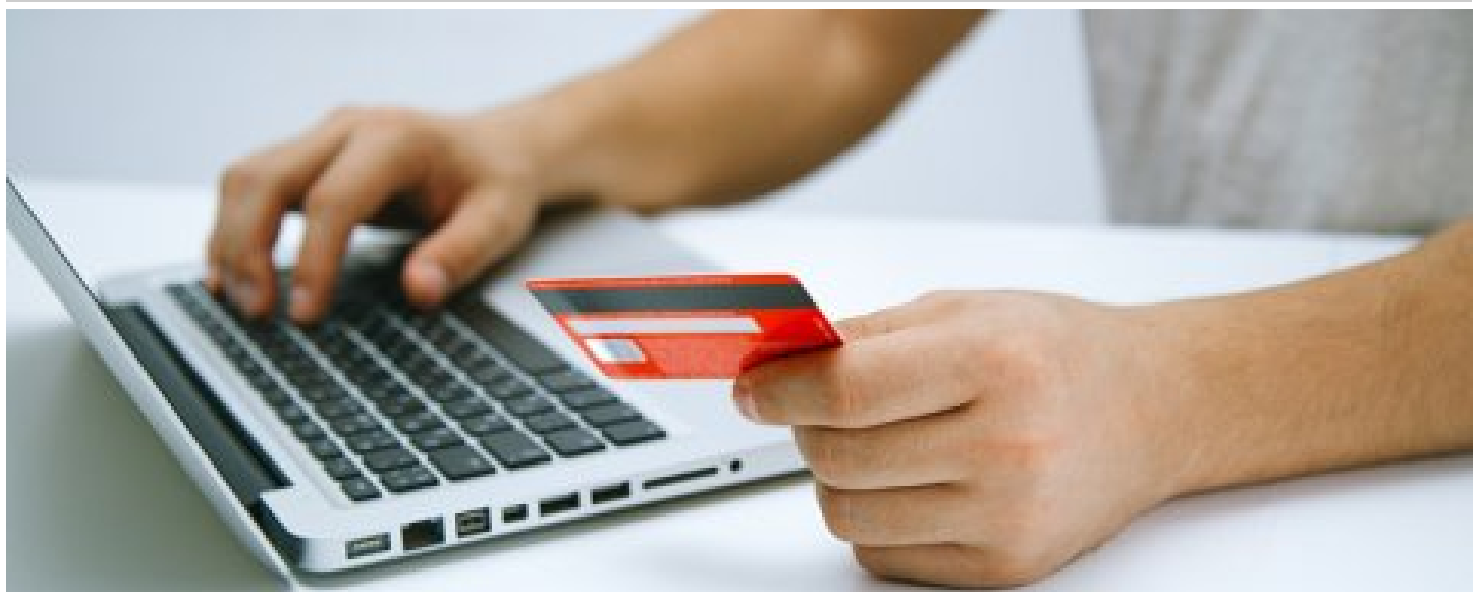
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