

21 Rules for an Effective Business Lunch

By [LawVision](#) on January 11, 2017

I come from a skiing family – not a “luxury condo at Vail” kind of skiing family, but more of a “tomp through the parking lot in ski boots with your sack lunch because your mom won’t let you buy a \$12 burger in the lodge” kind of skiing family.

Recently I asked my mother why we became so involved in skiing, an expensive sport, when we were not a family of substantial means. She explained that one of the reasons was the magic of the ski lift. Having your teenage sons all to yourself for the time it took to get to the top of the mountain was pure gold to a mother who wanted to understand what was going on in the lives of her children. During that short trip she could get information, build trust, give advice, and become closer to her kids.

Of course, business people have been doing this for years. Golf, ball games, and fishing trips all mirror that same experience – an activity that allows focused one-on-one time with someone important to your business success.

The convenient and fast-track version of that experience is the classic business lunch. In less than 90 minutes, business people can come together, build trust, understand one another better, and strengthen relationships in a relaxed and casual setting that is conducive to fostering strong bonds and positive feelings.

However, it’s not just about good feelings. Studies show that the business lunch creates better business outcomes. In [an experiment conducted by Lakshmi Balachandra](#), Assistant Professor of Entrepreneurship at Babson College and Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, simulations confirm that eating together in a restaurant during a negotiation increases the combined value of the outcome by 12%.

Anecdotal evidence supports this study. Kim Schmitt, Director of Marketing and Business Development at Stites & Harbison, PLLC, reports that “lunch with clients or potential clients is an easy way to strengthen relationships without so much pressure. It’s an opportunity to get to know someone on a more personal level while also gaining insights into any business challenges they may be experiencing. This in turn provides an avenue for you to help solve problems.”

The many tips, tactics, and rules for ensuring the success of the hosted business lunch could fill volumes. (Google “business lunch” and you’ll find plenty of advice.) My top 21 ideas are listed below.

However, the most important rule of the business lunch is this:

Know what you want and plan for it.

At the outset, you should know what you are trying to achieve with the meeting. Is it merely social and a way to stay in touch and show appreciation? If so, make sure you do just that – connect, build common ground, and show appreciation. If the purpose of the lunch is more concrete – to move something forward or to introduce a new idea or get agreement – make sure you’ve identified the outcome you desire and plan for it in advance. Begin with the end in mind and craft the meeting that will get you there. Come ready to explain your position briefly and know exactly what, when, and how you will ask for the outcome you want.

Leaving a lunch with warm handshakes and happy smiles is great if that was the objective but don’t get caught leaving a

meal if your objective was something more solid. Be ready to ask for what you want. If you are initially rebuffed, present the next best result you want.

Some lunches are no less a business meeting than meetings you hold in a conference room. If it's important, thinking about it casually in the cab ride to the restaurant is not enough. Enter the restaurant with a plan and the chance of a better outcome increases.

In addition to knowing what you want, I'm offering my list of business lunch rules below.

Craig Brown's Top 21 tips for hosting a business lunch:

1. Nail down the restaurant logistics – reservations, directions, parking, menu, and so forth.
2. Tardiness – not good.
3. Make it easy on your guest – be easy to find in an easy to find place where it's easy to talk.
4. Etiquette – bread to the left, drink to the right, use the correct fork, use your napkin, take small bites, etc., etc.
5. Phone – you know what to do.
6. Order something easy – skip the lobster and ribs and anything else that requires a bib.
7. Drinks – skip them. If you can't skip them, order only one, only light, and only if others join you.
8. Know when to jump in – make small talk before you order, talk business after you order.
9. Be interesting – lunching with a one-dimensional person is intolerable. Before you leave the office, check up on industry news, entertainment, and sports (try Google news for ideas).
10. Remember the personal – “How is your son, Jack, enjoying Yale?”
11. Know your agenda – review the key items you want to discuss before you get there.
12. Listen.
13. No whining – it's not about you.
14. Don't linger – one hour max.
15. Don't ambush – tell your guests in advance why you are meeting. Don't spring it on them during coffee.
16. Pay – make it clear that you are paying. Reach for it, pay for it, and don't make a big deal about it.
17. Don't jack with the staff – people like people who treat people like people.
18. Be likeable – if they walk away thinking you are an unpleasant person, you've wasted sixty bucks and an hour of your day. Don't be an ass.
19. Breakfast might be easier – defer to your guest.
20. Encourage the unemployed – offering to buy lunch and helping a prospect in between jobs = a friend for life.
21. Relax – it's just lunch.

You probably have others that work for you. Please share. I'd love to hear about them.