

Business lunches matter even if they don't involve martinis

By Ron Sylvester, Las Vegas Sun

The rules for entertaining business clients have changed since the days of the three-martini lunch.

Who has time to sit around and drink when there's so much work to be done?

Nevertheless, while leisurely "business" lunches may be a thing of the past, maintaining good customer and client relationships is more important than ever. In a fickle economy especially, loyalty can make the difference between growing a business or going out of business.

Many deals are still made over lunch, at a cocktail party or during a round of golf.

"People still want to do business with people they like and who make them feel special," said Robin Jay, the Las Vegas author of "The Art of the Business Lunch – Building Relationships Between 12 and 2."

Jay turned 20 years of experience in outside sales into a career speaking to business owners about fostering personal relationships with customers. One of the keys, she said, is face-to-face contact. Invite a client out for a meal. Take him or her to a show. Move beyond an email or a text.

"Breaking bread breaks down barriers," Jay said. "If you meet someone in an office, they never let their guard down like they will over a table. I've never lost a client who has been over to my house for dinner."

People, for instance, drive out of their way to patronize companies that make them feel comfortable and valued, even if it means passing closer businesses that offer similar services, Jay said. Simply put, good service trumps convenience.

So for companies entertaining clients, Jay recommends: "You ask them what's going on in their world and their business. How can you better help them?"

Jay recommends schmoozing established customers and prospective clients.

"I worked for a company that would not allow our sales team to take prospects out to lunch," Jay recalled. "Unless they were clients who were already spending money with us, my bosses could not see the value in investing in the relationship. I completely disagree. Their reasoning was penny wise and pound foolish."

Author Tom Peters suggests in his book, "The Pursuit of Wow! Every Person's Guide to Topsy-Turvy Times," that businesspeople avoid wasting their lunch hours eating alone or in an office. Instead, he suggests they use that time to build relationships. Peters calculated that with 49 work weeks per year, the average business person has 225 networking opportunities during lunchtime alone.

"When you know for a fact that taking your clients out and treating them right will elevate your relationships with them, how can you justify eating alone?" Jay asked.

Where you take clients also matters. In Las Vegas, a city known for great restaurants, it's important to find one that understands business lunches. Wait staff should be cognizant of time and give efficient service with few interruptions.

"That's not easy when you're juggling tourists, conventioneers and parties, in addition to businesspeople," said Tom Kaplan,

senior managing partner of the Wolfgang Puck Fine Dining Group. "That's why we try to train our servers, staff, the manager at front door, even the busser, to gauge the guests, recognize the business client and provide appropriate service."

Client outings don't have to be confined to restaurants, either.

Jay has taken clients shopping, to movies and to conventions. For one client who liked to gamble, she hosted lunches specifically at casinos so he could pop \$20 into a slot machine after eating.

Exclusive venues or events also impress.

"Any time you can take a person to a place where you have a membership and they can't go without you, it's a great opportunity," Jay said. "It could be a country club – or Costco."

Golf remains a popular business activity, as well.

"It's a fun, easy way of getting to know somebody, and it takes all the pressure away from a lunch," said Brian Esposito, a former golf pro who's now vice president of business development at Soil Tech, a Las Vegas construction business. "Usually you build a great camaraderie on the golf course."

Before setting up a tee time, Esposito researches companies to find out who the key decision makers are. That's who he aims to golf with.

"If the golf course is nice enough, usually the president will find a way to play," Esposito said. "If they are adamant that they do not want to go or that they don't play golf, then it's time to think of something else."

Esposito even gives beginners lessons. He'll take new players

to a driving range or putting green to introduce them to the sport.

“In golf, you’re with the same people for four or five hours,” he said. “And there’s always a chance you’ll hit a career shot, or they will. You make memories that way.”

Administrators at UNLV agree, so much so that they created a course titled, “Golf for Business and Life.” It teaches people how to build relationships specifically while golfing.

The class has drawn business majors, law students and people from just about every other industry, said professor Christopher Cain, a former golf pro and head of the PGA Professional Golf Management program at UNLV’s College of Hotel Administration.

“Golf has a reputation of being a game with a stuffy kind of country club atmosphere,” Cain said. “The key is making the experience fun. Once you have the relationship, it seems like the business follows.”

Successful networking doesn’t depend on closing a deal right away, either. In fact, most meetings won’t end with someone signing on the dotted line. More often, new connections lead to sales down the road.

Esposito recommends not letting clients leave the golf course without scheduling a follow-up appointment. Jay typically offers to drop by a client’s office with follow-up information.

“Sometimes,” Jay said, “it was just a matter of getting back to them with a simple phone call.”