

It's Just Dinner

How to handle the marketing dilemma of the decade.

by Sharla J. Frost

Marketing has become the second pillar of the practice of law. To succeed, lawyers have to develop business for the firm. No matter how adept you are at marketing, however, the time will come when the required activity includes dinner.

Nothing causes more angst amongst women lawyers than the idea of taking a male client out to dinner alone. Why are women so concerned about the basic business dinner? They are typically concerned because in American culture, dinner means dating.

How does the successful marketer disconnect those two concepts?

1. Simply, you should take charge of the situation. Demonstrate that the dinner is business. Develop your own list of restaurants that are appropriate for business, spend time getting to know the staff and have them view you as a regular customer. You make the reservation at a restaurant you have found to be perfect for business dinners: good food, good service, good lighting, and low noise level. Make sure that the maitre d' knows you are having a business dinner and gives you an appropriate table, rather than the "romantic" table in the corner.
2. Dress in a businesslike way. Wear a suit. Look like you are going to a business meeting. Arrange for your client to meet you at the restaurant: Do not pick him up unless you have an established business relationship that cannot be misconstrued. If need be, arrange for a car service to pick up and retrieve him.
3. Don't drink too much. Remember, this is not a social outing. There is nothing wrong with sharing a good bottle of wine or having a predinner cocktail. However, know your limits and stick to them. Since you will be choosing the restaurant, consider arranging with the sommelier to bring a pre-selected bottle of wine. Not only does it remove the stress of picking something appropriate, it also subtly signals that you are in control.
4. Take a legal pad with you so that you can jot notes down when you get to the portion of the dinner where you are talking about business. Prepare a simple agenda of topics to be discussed.
5. Don't take anyone else with you unless they are part of the existing business relationship. You should treat this event as you would any other business event. Take a colleague if you would take him to a non-dinner meeting, but not if he is only there for protection. Businessmen tell me that they are insulted to be viewed as potential perverts who necessitate the presence of a chaperone. (If you have reason to believe that dinner is a pretext for something else entirely, change the meeting to a lunch or breakfast meeting. The venue remains the same, but the social implications are quite different.)
6. Schedule another engagement to attend after the dinner, so that you are able to leave the restaurant without being obligated to after dinner socializing.



Remember: It's just dinner. Don't stress over it.

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