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Make the Most of Mealtime

By Jennifer Barrett

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Oct. 16, 2006 issue - Think that eating lunch at your desk makes you more productive? Not necessarily. "What you can accomplish in an hour at a business lunch more than compensates for the work you could have done at the office," says Robin Jay. She should know. The former Las Vegas advertising account manager claims her sales skyrocketed as a direct result of the more than 3,000 lunches she scheduled with existing and potential clients. "People just prefer to do business with people they like," she says. "When you take them out to lunch, make them feel special and put their needs first, you will be rewarded."

When Jay asked why other business people didn't dine with clients or associates more often, many admitted they were scared of saying or doing the wrong thing. Jay helps to assuage those fears in her book, "The Art of the Business Lunch," which was published earlier this year by Career Press and has already sold more than 25,000 copies.

Jay offers these tips: scout out restaurants beforehand so you don't waste time trying to decide where to eat (you can let the client pick the type of food, but have a list of options ready); pick a restaurant that suits your client's budget (if she's investing millions in your company, splurge—if it's someone on a budget, don't go too upscale or she'll feel uncomfortable); never pay cash, and hand your credit card to the waiter as soon as he delivers the menus so he comes to you for cues and doesn't put the bill in front of the client.

A good rule of thumb: think of a business lunch as a first date. Don't order anything too messy or complicated or reveal too much personal information. Keep the conversation light and topical. You can find common ground when talking about weekend plans, popular TV shows or movies, news (though avoid politics), family (ask about the kids), recent or upcoming vacations and sports teams. Don't forget, of course, to do some research on the client beforehand so you know his or her interests. Finally, whatever you talk about, make sure the client feels like "the most important person in the world," says Jay. At least for that hour.

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