

THE RSVP FASHION AWARDS 2008 - BEST DRESSED WOMEN INSIDE

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EXCLUSIVE

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MARIE BETTS-JOHNSON

MARIE BETTS-JOHNSON IS CERTAINLY one woman who knows her p's and q's as founder and president of the International Protocol Institute of California. This vivacious and stylish native of Tipperary is an internationally recognized etiquette consultant, speaker and columnist on the west coast of the US. Marie has been based in San Diego since 1989 where she provides programmes in everything from corporate etiquette to dining diplomacy and from cross cultural contrasts to protocol for job interviews and much else in between. Recently this very talented etiquette expert was back in Tipperary where she was spending some time with her sister Olive O'Gorman who owns the very charming Glasha Farmhouse, in County Waterford and there, Marie spoke to RSVP; beginning with her own definition of etiquette.

Let me first say that etiquette is not an excuse for snobbishness! In fact, etiquette is the opposite to snobbishness! True etiquette is simply having respect for others and doing your best to put everyone at ease, smoothing out the rough spots and showing consideration for ourselves, our clients and colleagues. This creates a win/win situation for all concerned and, in the bigger picture, avoids conflicts and misunderstandings.

You worked with the late King Hussein and Queen Noor of Jordan, how did that come about?

I joined ALIA (The Royal Jordanian Airline) as an Air Hostess in 1980. My plan was to stay for a year and travel and explore as much of the world as possible. Fortunately, I was in the right place at the right time, and I met a member of the Royal Staff and was offered a job with the Royal Crew on board the Royal Jet. Of course, I thought this was just a dream, but it became a reality and I flew exclusively with their Majesties. On board, we had the opportunity to meet with dignitaries and royalty from all over the world, some of whom included the late Princess Diana and Prince Charles. We interacted with the family when their children accompanied them on trips and occasionally, the crew joined them for dinners or other outings. I was very lucky because the Royal family made us all feel like we were members of their family. Both King Hussein and Queen Noor were devoted to bringing peace to the Middle East and it was my impression that the trappings of royalty were secondary to them. This experience was the catalyst for my interest in etiquette. Everything was done perfectly and attention to detail was mandatory. It gave me insight into what it takes to make things run smoothly and the behind the scenes effort in hosting international guests and dignitaries.

Where you always interested in the rules of convention?

At home, my parents liked to entertain a lot and I learned what it takes to pull out all the stops and be a superb host. In boarding school, the strict rules became engrained in me and, even though I did not see the benefit at that time, they stood me in good stead when they were called upon. In 1985, I left Jordan and went to the United States. There, I received an Associates Degree in Marketing and Public Relations. Because the Jordanian experience was still fresh in my mind, I went on to complete a course in Washington D.C., on Business Etiquette and Protocol in 1989. I then expanded upon the corporate business programs and developed programs on International Business Protocol, Teenage Etiquette, Interviewing Etiquette and the Protocol of Excellent Customer Service.

Are good manners becoming an endangered species today?

Unfortunately, I have to say yes to that question and it worries me. It is my contention that the more affluent society becomes, the more greed it engenders. It all comes down to the pursuit of money no matter what the cost in human terms. This creates a climate of "nouveau riche" and all the fallout that implies. The good news is that everything has to take its course and I believe Ireland will come to this conclusion too. In the United States after the 1960s Hippie Generation, etiquette fell by the wayside, but, since the early 1990s, etiquette has made a strong resurgence at every level of society and etiquette consultants are in high demand.

Do you find that people become very nervous in your company even in social situations such as dinner parties, or do people simply not invite you to save face?

People are generally nervous in my company for about five minutes and after I reassure them that "I'm off duty" they tend to not worry about my presence. Because of my easy going personality, people soon realise that it is not my intention to embarrass anyone and I will just go with the flow. It is very important to me that people feel this way as I don't ever want to become the "etiquette police." So no worries, I still get invited to the best parties in town!

Can you give an example of how poor etiquette can let a person down professionally?

A Human Resource Specialist for a big US Corporation recently told me that he makes a point of walking out to the waiting area to view the candidates he is about

to interview. If he sees any of them slouching in their chairs, chewing gum, looking disinterested or dressed inappropriately, he walks right back into his office and writes his "Letter of Regret" to that particular candidate even before he has interviewed them! Another example was when a corporate lawyer invited his client to dinner in a fine restaurant. They decided to have a drink at the bar before being seated at their table. The lawyer proceeded to "chug a lug" or drink his beer from the bottle (even though the Bar Tender had placed a glass next to his beer) as if he was attending a fraternity party. The client was not impressed and decided that this was not the calibre of lawyer that he wanted to do business with.

Does etiquette encompass looks and style – is it linked to income or can you be money rich and etiquette poor?

Etiquette does encompass looks and style to the extent that a person should make an effort to dress for the occasion and look their best. It is not appropriate to show up for work in grungy jeans nor is it appropriate to go to a business dinner in a too-revealing cocktail dress. Whether we like it or not, the person we are on the inside is judged by what we wear on the outside. If we do not make the effort to dress and look well for an event or a business occasion, we let ourselves, our host, and our company down.

Looks and style can be linked to income both positively and negatively. Good taste is what's important! Some people have the income to afford the most "in" fashions but they can look like they're trying too hard or in the most extreme cases, look absolutely ridiculous. Style is

something that can be attained on a very small income if someone knows what it is that suits their physique and what is expected for the occasion. I always think of French women when it comes to style. They buy very expensive classical pieces, such as pants and skirts and add seasonal accessories and perhaps inexpensive pieces that they can discard at the end of the season. This works out as both economical and stylish. We have to find our own style and create our signature around it. But, it must suit you, the occasion and the business environment.

As to the question of people being rich in money and poor in etiquette, it will hardly come as a surprise that many of the rich and famous are seriously misguided when it comes to style and etiquette. Some examples of style and etiquette are Queen Noor of Jordan, Princess Diana of Wales and Jackie Kennedy-Onassis. They were leaders of style and taste. Yes, there are many instances of poor etiquette and style, but it would be bad taste on my part to give you examples!

What one thing really annoys you about bad manners or poor etiquette?

People who take an incoming call from their mobile phones in the middle of a business meeting or lunch. Of course, there are exceptions and if you are expecting a very important call, it is okay to let the person you are meeting with know ahead of time. If you must take a call, reassure your guest or colleague that you will not be long and keep your word! Another pet peeve is people speaking loudly, telling the story of their lives in public places such as supermarkets or other stores. ▶







They say first impressions are lasting. How does one go about creating a good impression?

We only get 7 seconds to create a good first impression! Therefore, we must look the part, act the part and the rest will follow. Studies have shown that 93% of our first impression involves how we look, walk, body language and the tone of our voice. The remaining 7% consists of what we actually have to say. This is the sad truth, so my advice would be to dress for success and put your best foot forward no matter what the occasion!

For many people the handshake has been replaced by the continental style kiss on the cheek or air kiss! When is one more appropriate than the other?

The handshake is always the most appropriate greeting in business situations. Because I live in California, I am inclined to give my Irish family a hug and kiss on the cheek when I greet them. The reason being, that I've missed them and am so glad to see them again. At first they thought I was a little bit weird, but they now accept my effusive greeting. But, in a business situation, I always greet with a handshake and leave the hugs and kisses for family and friends.

What tips would you give people who wanted to improve their standard of etiquette?

I would advise that they purchase books such as "Letitia Baldridges Complete Guide to Executive Manners." This is one of my all-time favourites and encompasses most aspects of business etiquette.

Secondly, watch and observe those whom you respect and admire. Ask them for their advice and practice what they preach!

Thirdly, remember that etiquette is not absolute adherence to the rule of etiquette law, but consideration and flexibility to the situation on hand.

In terms of etiquette what are the main changes that you have noticed in Ireland in the recent years?

The main thing that comes to mind is that people don't have time for each other anymore and that is a sad state of affairs. Etiquette is no longer as important as meeting a deadline. The fast pace of business has infected this society and less time is spent on interacting in a leisurely way. Road rage is rampant. Everyone is "attached" to their mobile phone and nobody dresses up anymore, even going to fine restaurants. There is more stress in this society and the Celtic tiger, though it was a boom to Irish business, has taken its toll on Ireland as a whole. **GSVP**

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LOCATION: OUR THANKS TO OLIVE O'GORMAN FOR PROVIDING THE BEAUTIFUL BACKDROP FOR OUR PHOTOSHOOT AT THE AWARD WINNING GLASHA FARMHOUSE, BALLYMACARBERY, CO. WATERFORD.
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