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★ Job advice

COCKTAIL ETIQUETTE



PHOTO BY/MAE MERRA

Have you been invited to a cocktail party? Here are some tips to help you get through an evening of corporate networking.

BY ANN MUKEI AND
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Etiquette is simply a big word for good manners. If you are in a professional career, chances are that every once in a while, you will be invited to a cocktail. Alternatively, you might be called upon to attend one hosted by your company. This is where etiquette will matter.

The affairs are typically held at a public venue where you will spend a lot of time standing. This could be uncomfortable, especially since cocktails call for dressing up, but these events are invaluable to building your professional network.

Diana Mather of Public Image has been in the business of training corporate professionals in the UK for the past 20 years. She recently opened a new office in Nairobi that

provides a host of lessons, including department, public speaking, the art of conversation, how to dress, table manners and cocktail etiquette, based on the British rules of society.

She stresses the importance of etiquette, saying, "If you do some research on how the people you do business with live and work, you are likely to get more from them. That's why etiquette is so important." Even in Africa, where Western manners are still regarded as foreign, you need to know the rules, she says, adding,

"Whether you use them or not is all up to you."

Since business cocktails are here to stay, Mather advises that, once invited

to a quick escape.

You might meet several people you know and stand in a group. If you see someone standing alone, bring them into the conversation, introducing yourself with a firm handshake. Make light conversation while maintaining eye contact. Avoid the temptation of looking around the room to see if someone more important has arrived. Respect the other's personal space. Stand at least a hand-shake away. "Sex, politics and religion are topics to steer clear of," says Mather.

It can be difficult to judge when you may join a pair engaged in conversation. Try to read their body language; if they are already facing each other, chances are they are having a private discussion. However,



you should do research on the guests attending the cocktail party.

"Conversation will be much easier for you," she explains.

Kenyans have become accustomed to keeping African time, but be punctual to a cocktail — or any other business functions. Larore's shows a lack of respect for the host. Mather says, "Always smile when you walk into a room," she stresses. Looking happy to be there breaks ice and makes you approachable.

And feel free to enjoy a drink or two. When it is served in a stem glass, Diana explains, the glass should be held in the left hand by the stem, "so the right is left free to pick canapés." It also won't do to shake hands with a clammy hand.

Remember you are there to meet people, so do the rounds and meet new people before you head to the bar or buffet table. Food and drinks are not the main goal. In fact, it is unpalatable to over-indulge on alcohol.

If you came alone, try not to cling to the first friendly person you meet. Behaving like this person is your lifeline will bear the whole purpose of networking. Be polite in shaking off dead bones. Join a group together or find someone to introduce

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are facing the room, feel free to walk over, introduce yourself and join the conversation. Kissing someone on the first meeting, however, is a no-no.

Like any formal event, a cocktail requires some thought with regard to wardrobe. A dress just above the knee or a smart trouser suit will do. For the men, consider a dark suit. "If you're heading there straight from work, carry something with you to the office to change into," advises Diana.

She also advises that men always keep a jacket and tie in the office for unexpected occasions, and ladies a blouse and nice shoes.

"Wear colour," she says to ladies. "It's nice to have something bright because you stand out." She says what you should find something that enhances your image, and carry yourself well. "The first thing we notice about you are your clothes."

If you don't see an abstray, don't ask for one. This is a sign that smoking is not allowed at that event. If it is, be careful not to drop cigarette ashes on the floor or use a glass or saucer as an ashtray. At the end of the day, your etiquette is what is likely to get you future invitations.