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Dining etiquette in the age of social media

Are you guilty of not minding your manners when it comes to social media etiquette during lunch or dinner with colleagues, friends or family? Well, you're part of a rapidly growing club. When was the last time you were in a restaurant and glanced around to see so many guests sharing a meal, but instead of visiting with each other, looking down while operating a cellphone?

Several months ago, while joining a colleague for dinner at a fine dining restaurant, I was in my normal mode of people watching. I was intrigued, to say the least, by what I observed. At least one person at every table was using some type of portable device. One guest actually had his laptop on the table, and his table-mate was talking on her mobile phone.

After my colleague arrived — she's a people watcher as well — we both observed a table of eight that we later discovered was an 18th birthday gathering. The group ranged in age from the birthday boy to grandparents who looked to be in their 70s. While my colleague and I were chatting with our server, we noticed everyone at the birthday group reaching in and placing their mobile phones in the middle of the table. Now, as you might imagine, we were getting really curious. With a smile on my face and a "pardon the interruption" moment, I walked over to the table and mentioned that I had observed their actions and was quite fascinated. Apparently, it was a scheme to keep everyone engaged and not using their phones. The trick, so to speak, was

that the first person to break down and use their phone had to pay for dinner. I laughed and laughed. Of course, in this case the parents were paying, but what a novel concept. Perhaps, as appropriate, some of us might consider this or a similar idea to increase levels of personal engagement.

According to the TalkTrack research used in Ed Keller and Brad Fay's "The Face-to-Face Book: Why Real Relationships Rule in a Digital Marketplace," "Our conversations in person are much more powerful than those online. They go on to say, "The decisions we make are based on true interpersonal influence, social influence, which happens most often, and most powerfully, face-to-face." Keller and Fay's TalkTrack research study also points out that 90 percent of the influential conversations we have every day happen offline, while only 8 percent are online.

Additionally, as reported by Dr. Paul Booth, an assistant professor of media and cinema studies in the College of Communication at DePaul University in Chicago, social media absolutely affects how we engage with one another across all venues and ages.

"There has been a shift in the way we communicate; rather than face-to-face interaction, we're tending to prefer mediated communication," he asserts. "We'd rather email than meet; we'd rather text than talk on the phone."

Booth's study also points out that interaction on social media tends to be weak ties; that is, we don't feel as

personally connected to the people at the other end of our communication as we do when we're face-to-face. He goes on to say, "So while we're communicating more, we may not necessarily be building relationships as strong."

The bottom line: People — those human beings at your table — take priority. Texting, reading and responding to emails, receiving and placing phone calls, or even placing your device on the table in anticipation of its use have no place during a meal at a restaurant with colleagues, friends and family. Exceptions might include business meetings or emergencies. In an emergency situation, simply excuse yourself, move to a location that will be more private, handle the call and return. Or, if you are expecting a call of extreme importance, let those you're with know. Put your phone on vibrate and continue conversing with those at the table.

When you mind your dining and social media manners and have respect and consideration for those around you, others will appreciate your graciousness, good judgment and concern.

Dr. Shirley White is now a member of BIC Media Solutions' speakers bureau. For more information about BIC Media Solutions' speakers bureau, contact Earl Heard at earlheard@bicalliance.com or call (800) 460-4242.

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