



Bartending Etiquette: Avoiding Gaucheries and Faux Pas

A quick look around the room tells the story. The guy in the corner booth...the one with the irritated expression...has a drink sloshing over the rim with little pieces of soggy paper napkin stuck to the sides. The guys in the suits at the bar have been waiting easily ten or twelve minutes, with no drinks and have even less patience. The rapping of their knuckles on the bar is a sure sign they're a lost cause. A few short minutes later the two briskly head out the front door with the department of men who have tolerated enough bad service for one night.

The problem is that the bartender is otherwise occupied—occasionally making drinks for the servers, washing a glass or two and flirting with the coed sitting by the station. It is about all the young man can handle.

Murphy's Law—people get the worst service on those dog days when they can least emotionally afford it.

We all have our thresholds. Rankle our sensibilities, trod on our concepts of lounge etiquette, and we'll rebel. There are unwritten

conventions governing professional bar conduct. You know most of them intuitively. Then why is it that so many bartenders consistently step on those conventions? And why do they all seem to wait on you?

One such convention suggests that inquiring if a customer would like another drink when the person's glass is still half full (or empty) is pushy and waiting until he is spinning the glass upside down on a length of sip sticks is inattentive. The time to ask is when the person's drink is about a quarter full (or three-quarters empty).

In a perfect world, glasses wouldn't sweat and cocktail napkins would last longer than 2-3 minutes. In this dimension we're left with the reality that these ubiquitous paper squares disintegrate when wet. Soggy, tattered napkins belie the quality of the service rendered. Cocktail napkins should be changed with regularity. Either that or switch to coasters.

Few things disturb gin and tonic drinkers more than bartenders who drop in lime wedges without first squeezing the juice out of them. Fishing a

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lime wedge out of a drink is low on most people's list of fun things to do in public. Along the same lines, a lemon twist is so named because it is meant to be twisted, an action that will express the lemon's essential oils and fragrance into the drink. The outer peel is then rubbed along the rim of the glass so that the flavor of the lemon can be appreciated. Do the same thing with speared olives or cocktail onions.

Tacky too is a bartender who is conspicuous when counting his tips. Gratuities are a private matter between two people—the customer and bartender—played out in a public setting. Counting ones tips is indiscreet. Likewise, tip jars overflowing with large bills and treasury notes should be kept out of view. It is unlikely that it will make people want to dig deep to contribute and some may actually find it offensive.

Another source of ruffled feathers is failing to acknowledge that customers exist. When people sit down at a bar, they will extend the bartender a certain grace period before she sidles over to take their order. Miss the grace period and she'll have to nearly kill them with hospitality to overcome the snub. If the bartender is temporarily too busy to wait on guests, that grace period can be easily extended with a smile and an "I'll be right with you."

If you're one who likes to keep score, forgetting what a person is drinking leaves a negative impression (minus two points), while recalling a

regular customer's name and using it correctly in a sentence is a major bartending coup (plus six points). Being friendly and polite is still politically correct (plus five), but gratuitous, overly friendly behavior is as convincing as a soap opera love scene (minus 3).

A bartender's professionalism is most apparent when the bar is busy. Whether it's that certain "calm under fire" quality or their precise bursts of movement, really good bartenders are a pleasure to watch. On the flip side, a bartender who loses his cool, making the customers bear the brunt of his anger, is like a cold hard slap of reality. People get slapped around plenty in their day-to-day life without needing to be subjected to it during "happy hour."

Customers are notorious for asking bartenders for drink suggestions and a shrug of the shoulder is an inappropriate response. Bartenders are well advised to have a repertoire of good tasting, creative drink recipes in mind that will fit the bill. They should also make sure that they hear drink orders in their entirety, noting any and all pouring instructions such as "...with a twist," "...with a splash" or "...with a water back." Customers seldom hide their irritation when their drinks aren't made up to their specifications.

If nothing else, when all else fails, bartenders should frequently air-out their sense of humor. After all, it may be the only time the customer laughs all day.

Robert Platkin is a judge at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition and the author of numerous books including the 5th edition of *The Bartender's Companion: The Original Guide to American Cocktails and Drinks*. To read more from Robert (and other members of BarMedia) visit his blog, BarMedia.com/blog. You can reach him at BarMedia— 1-800-421-7179 or robert@barmedia.com.

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