

# The pleasures of business



BY MIKE MCCARRON

A buddy of mine is really into LinkedIn, which is like Facebook for the business set. He spent hours tracking down old colleagues. He answers questions in the Q&A section. His profile pic is one of the best self-portraits I've seen.

My friend has been trying to get me to sign up and join his hundreds of contacts, but my idea of social networking is a round of golf. Come to think of it, I've been trying to get the guy out on the links, but he can't seem to separate his thumbs from his BlackBerry.

"BlackBerryitis" is spreading faster than a flu pandemic.

If there's a cure, it's the fact that strong business relationships are also personal ones. People are loyal to people, not companies. Spending time away from the office with a customer can be one of the more productive things you do professionally and personally. Turn off the computer, pick up the phone, and remember these five things salespeople should know about entertaining clients:

**1. Plan and prepare.** Plan to spend some social time with every one of your best customers at some point between now and the end of the year doing what they like to do. Spending Saturday at a bar watching a cage match on TV may not be your idea of fun, but it'll be worth it on the next sales call when you take three lanes off a competitor. Before you invite someone out for a night on the town, check to make sure his company allows it. Some companies have no-entertainment policies. Then, make sure your customer never has to go into his pocket unless he offers. Bring enough cash for incidentals.

**2. Eat and drink.** Lunch or dinner? My rule of thumb is that I entertain prospects during the day and customers in the evening. Consider inviting spouses or significant others to evening events. Invite two other people to help

the customer feel more at ease. Don't wreck the night by taking alcohol to an extreme. In fact, don't allow the evening to get extreme in any way. Don't be the loudest; don't order the most expensive bottle of wine; and don't eat the most. Be gracious and moderate. When it's time to go home, no drinking and driving, period. Take a taxi. That's why you have an expense account.

**3. Talk business.** Don't do it. Save the pitch for the next sales call. Remember, the purpose of entertainment is to get to know each other as people, not as buyer and seller.

**4. Take notes.** The personal insight you gain over a meal or during a game will prove invaluable on your next sales call. Take notes (use a pen and small pad of paper, not your phone). It's easy to forget that your guest loves Mexican food, he's a 5 handicap, and that he and his wife are going horseback riding in Ireland for their anniversary.

**5. Expense responsibly.** Treat every dollar like it's your own. First, if you're selling deal-of-the-day freight, don't waste your time and money on customers who are motivated by price. Second, entertain strategically. Is your lunch appointment someone who can influence purchasing decisions? Third, don't abuse the expense account. Do you and Charlie need to double-team a client, or is one of you just looking for a free meal?

Next time you're getting ready to bang out an email, make a phone call instead. Extend an invitation to get together. You stand a better chance of getting the freight when you're standing with your client and you're not buried in his inbox.

**Don't rely on just email to build those personal relationships.**

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