

Face-Saving Tips When Drinks Mix With Work

By Mary Mitchell

Whether you're a drinker or a health-conscious teetotaler, here are some face-saving tips about how to behave at work-related cocktail parties or when you're down at the corner bistro after a long day at the office.

It Seems So Simple, But ...

You and a colleague, perhaps your boss, have arranged to meet for drinks at a restaurant or sports bar. Or perhaps you are on your way to a business cocktail party.

In both cases, drinking dilemmas will have their day in the dark.

What to order? How many is too much? Does sitting at a cocktail table for two suggest an intimacy you'd prefer to avoid? Does standing at the bar suggest a "hail fellow, well met!" image you'd rather no project?

Meeting for drinks may have been your bright idea - what if he or she is a teetotaler?

No One Ever HAS to Drink

Cocktail parties suggest safety (and confidence) in numbers, but don't be fooled. A guest has every bit as much responsibility as the host to contribute to the party's success. Remember this: no one ever has to apologize for not drinking alcohol. Ever.

"But my associates bully me into drinking, or at least they try. It's hard to be the odd person out," you may say. You bet it is. Still, your language can make the situation smoother. Just say, "I'm not having wine/beer/liquor today. Please go ahead and enjoy whatever you want. I'm perfectly happy."

Your statement, using the word "today", removes any judgment about the consumption of alcohol. You don't even need to drink alcohol when you propose a toast. Be decisive about your order, especially if you don't drink. Mention your drink by name.

"I'll have a Pellegrino, please," for example. That just sounds a lot more savvy than whimpering, "Oh, I'll just have a glass of water."

Stick to the Two-Drink Limit

In general, two drinks should be the limit when you're imbibing alcohol, whether it's wine, beer or liquor. For that matter, stick to the two-drink rule when you're drinking just about anything. Otherwise, your lingering might be misconstrued.

If you are standing at the bar, which is preferable to a dark table in the corner (which also might be misconstrued), start a tab. Close it when you've hit your limit of two. Say to your companion, "Will you do the math, or should I?" Then settle the check and leave. The entire encounter shouldn't last longer than an hour at the outside.

Be Yourself

Drinks with business associates is no time to experiment with exotic concoctions, nor is it the moment to have your first martini (take it from one who knows!), dry with a twist.

Be authentic - and low maintenance. If all you ever drink is Diet Pepsi, don't stop now. If you're a beer-on-tap person, keep on keeping on. Wine drinkers gain nothing by pretending phony sophistication, especially when the choice is house white or house red.

Unless the house choices happen to be Cuvee Rot Gut, drink them and don't interrogate bartenders who are doing their best to serve 50 people at once. Most decent restaurants and bars serve quality house brands. If they carry a premium choice, they'll tell you. Don't be afraid or shy to ask what it costs if the server doesn't volunteer it. And once told, don't be too intimidated to decline on the basis of price. That shows you're secure; not cheap.

Use Your Head

Know your limits. If you're sleep-deprived and stressed out, chances are that one alcoholic drink will hit you faster than when you're on vacation.

Don't ever drink on an empty stomach. Eat an apple, a sandwich, granola bar, anything, before you add alcohol. The single worst gaffe you can make is to get loaded, regardless of how much others try to goad you into excess.

Should an associate's sobriety come into question, don't hesitate to take him or her home by cab. Be firm and unemotional, "I'd feel a lot better if we get into a cab and drop you off." If that should happen to be your boss, never mention it unless he or she does first. And never speak of it with anyone else.

Should you be the one who needed to be driven home, apologize the next day and never again speak of it, especially not in jest. Keep in mind that, whatever the venue, you are still at a business meeting. As such, you cannot afford to let down your guard. If you do, the price might be impossibly high.

Cheers!