



Chapter 22

WHAT TIME IS THE 11AM MEETING?

How long can you keep a client waiting? Here's a quick test.

You have a client who's a nice enough guy. However, his business isn't exactly one of your more lucrative sources of income. You have just finished a meeting, the main purpose of which was to give this client a chance to introduce a new senior member of his team (who also seems to be a nice enough guy).

The meeting concludes and in a rush of blood to the head you blurt out an invitation to both of your clients to join you for a drink at a nearby bar.

The time is now 6pm. The more senior of your clients answers that a drink would be great but adds that he'll have to leave at 7 for another commitment.

Do you:

- A. Drop everything and head straight for the bar to maximise the quality time with your clients before the 7pm deadline?
- B. Direct your clients to the bar and tell them you'll join them as soon as you have responded to a very important phone call?
- C. Withdraw your invitation, claiming to have forgotten another appointment?
- D. Direct your clients to the bar and then join them 45 minutes later without accounting for your tardiness?

If you answered A, you clearly have a lot to learn. Not only does this reek of unnatural enthusiasm, it also marks you as an insecure novice. For the most part, these clients know they're just minnows and so to be treated with fawning attention would seem to be completely inappropriate and even a little worrying.

B isn't a bad answer. It reminds your existing client of his ranking in your client pecking order. It lets your client's new colleague know that whilst you value his boss's business, you have other clients and other priorities.

The trouble with C isn't so much that it sounds like you suddenly realised your folly in blurting out the invitation (which might be the truth). The real problem is that it leaves a degree of uncertainty. Your clients will have a suspicion that your claimed "other commitment" was a feeble invention to renege on the drink (which of course it is), but they'll have no proof.

Yep, the only really satisfactory answer to this test is D.

By inviting clients to have a drink and then not turning up until they're about to leave, you're making a few really powerful statements. First and most obviously, you are reminding your piddling little client that his business really means jack-shit to you. Just in case he'd forgotten. Simultaneously you're sending a potent signal to your client's offsider. Without even uttering a word you have

unequivocally warned him not to get grand and misguided ideas about his company's importance to you.

By inviting your clients for a drink and then not arriving, your existing client will feel that you've made him appear an insignificant fool to his impressionable new staff member. It's a slap in the face with a wet fish – and not a herring either but something more substantial, like a fifty-kilo catfish, one that's been dead a week.

The coup de grace is that when you do finally deign to show up, you show absolutely no sign of remorse nor make any attempt to explain what kept you.

Yes I'm late. What's the problem? These messages should never be verbalised. With practice, you can communicate them with facial expressions and body language.

A diva never swans onto the movie set three hours late only to spoil the impact by grovelling forgiveness and blabbering feeble excuses about a broken nail.

The gods have never apologised. Neither should you. You are a really important person. You are busy. You are magnificent. You are ... you get the drift.

(Oh, in case you're wondering, the test above is based on a real event. A former partner of mine did exactly this – he invited our former clients to have a drink and then turned up just before the clients had to leave, with no apology or explanation offered. Excellent stuff.)

Whether at your client's office, your own or on neutral ground, keeping clients waiting is one of your more powerful and infuriating tools.

If a client comes to your office, time spent on the reception sofa is an opportunity to be reminded of how celebrated you are. To this end, make sure there are plenty of awards, honorary doctorates and the like scattered around the walls. Keep the reception area well stocked with copies of magazines that ran complimentary articles on you or your company – especially those articles accompanied by photographs that captured you in an unusually flattering light or show you with a former head of state. Put footage of your best work or television interviews on a loop to play on the plasma screen facing the waiting area.

Most clients should understand and appreciate that they're being forced to wait not just because

you are a very busy, very important person but to give them time to appreciate just how lucky they are to have been granted the opportunity to work with you.

Clients misunderstand everything

Now, whilst all of this makes perfect sense to you and me, clients (as we know too well) are champions at misinterpreting events. They can be so focused on their own issues that they completely fail to see the bigger picture – the one with you in the middle of it.

They completely fail to understand the hectic pace at which you work. (Well, the hectic pace at which you work when you're not lunching.)

It's easy for them to compartmentalise their working days into neat little modules separated by immovable time barriers. They can agree to schedule a meeting to start at 11 and finish at 12 with the security of knowing they'll be ready to start at 11 and ready to wrap at 12. That's because there's not much else in their diaries but more meetings with people with nothing to do but attend meetings.

They all arrive at the designated meeting room at five to the hour, unpack their corporate pens and notepads, turn off their mobile phones and pour themselves cups of tepid coffee-like liquid. As the big hand sweeps up to the hour, they're ready to start the meeting.

At about five past, they're looking at the clock and clicking the nibs of their biros in and out and in and out, secretly wondering what might have delayed you.

By ten past, they're openly trying to guess the reason for your lateness. Heavy traffic is the predictable consensus.

By a quarter past the hour, one of them has tried to get hold of you, but your phone's turned off. The senior client is fuming and the 2-i-C suggests they start the meeting anyway – even though, in their minds at least, the meeting has been convened for your benefit.

By twenty past the hour, they have exhausted the business update and other scene-setting small talk and have started the meeting proper.

If they're relieved to see you when you stroll in at half past the hour, they don't show it. Naturally,

you don't offer an explanation for your late arrival, although the fact that you're slurping a cappuccino and eating a doughnut should be enough to communicate that your morning has been a whirlwind and they're lucky you could make it at all.

But that doesn't seem to be the case. In fact, if you were sensitive to such things, you'd almost think there was a little iciness in the air. Are they deliberately ignoring you or is that PowerPoint slide really as interesting as they all seem to find it?

Anyway, you're practised at these meetings and so no sooner have you sat down than you're asking one of those penetrating questions for which you're famous. To which one of those assembled replies snottily that they had addressed that very issue about ten minutes earlier. Well, how were you to know? You're not a bloody mind reader. And you certainly couldn't have heard anything while you were having the last of your pre-meeting cigarettes on the footpath downstairs.

Anyway, at a couple of minutes to 12, someone calls the meeting to a close and all those assembled check their pathetic little diaries to see where and with whom they're meeting at midday. And off they go.

Okay, now fast forward to a time when you have long forgotten that meeting – to, say, mid afternoon that same day. You stroll back into your office, feeling quite sated after a slab of medium rare beef and a bottle of pinot noir at one of the restaurants where all the staff know your name.

One of your colleagues has received a call from one of the clients present in the morning's meeting. That client lets slip that he wasn't at all impressed with your late arrival for the meeting. It was even suggested that the senior client at your meeting was fuming. Fuming! You thank your colleague and advise that you'll take care of it (which you won't).

When your colleague has gone, you spend a moment contemplating this news. Amused. What's with these people? How come they don't get it? They didn't appoint you because of your punctuality. They appointed you for your laser mind. They agreed to your outrageous fees to benefit from your vast experience, infinite wisdom and the clarity of your vision. And now here they are bitching because you were half an hour late. (Well, okay, late again. Or more accurately, as usual.)

There's a perverse principle at work here. Punctuality won't win you a piece of business. But tardiness can help you lose it. It doesn't make any sense at all. It loses clients nonetheless.

You see, some clients get their values all arse-about. They ought to merely concern themselves with the value of your contribution to their business success. Instead they get sidetracked (even if it is only momentarily) by your inability to keep to their timetables. So whilst you think you're dazzling them with a presentation that demonstrates your extraordinary insight into their business, all they see as they sit across the table are the giant hands of a giant clock lurching around the giant face.

Why is it such a big issue?

Hard to say. Maybe it's because your client's father was in the armed forces and therefore planned every day and every family outing as an army manoeuvre. You come along with your alternative-lifestyle-liberal-arts family background where things happen when and where fate dictates. There's bound to be a bit of a lifestyle mismatch.

Maybe your client is one of those poor souls who get some perverse pleasure from a diary page that is wall-to-wall meetings. One meeting gets delayed a few minutes and suddenly the whole day needs to be re-arranged.

Whatever. It's no reason to go changing yet another fundamental part of your character. If you're naturally tardy, stay tardy. If you aren't naturally tardy, work at it. Turning up late reinforces your aura of importance.

Being late is good – even if your clients don't seem to think so. Better to be late for your own funeral than early.

Off On A Tangent

Something else I just don't get: you can be renowned for punctuality all your life. The moment you die, people start calling you "the late Greg Alder". Late for what? Was I supposed to die a while back?

Finally, there's one really important proviso before you keep a client waiting: You'd better be worth it. You'd better be outrageously good at what you do. You'd better be unique. You'd better be indispensable.

“People count up the faults of those who keep them waiting.”

French proverb