What Ever Happened To Good Old Fashioned Manners?
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More than one hundred years ago, Oscar Wilde said, “The world was my oyster, but I used the wrong fork.”

How important is it to know which fork to use? Can what you don’t know hurt you? Where do the “rules of etiquette” come from? What has happened to good manners?

Rules of conduct have been around for a long time. The first known etiquette book was written in 2400 B.C. by Ptah-hotep. It was from these origins that American etiquette grew.

Louis XIV’s (September 5, 1638 – September 1, 1715) gardener at Versailles was faced with a serious problem: he could not stop members of the nobility from trampling about in the delicate areas of the King’s garden. He finally attempted to stop this unwanted behavior by posting signs called *etiquets* which warned them to “Keep off the Grass”. When this course of action failed, the King himself had to issue an official decree that no one could go beyond the bounds of the signs. Later, the name “etiquette” was given to a ticket for court functions that included rules regarding where to stand and what to do.

Then we have George Washington (1732 – 1799). George Washington always had wonderful manners. During those days, good manners were just accepted as a way of life. But George Washington, being somewhat precocious, at the age of 14, wrote down 110 rules under the title “Rules of Civility & Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation.”

The first U.S. book about manners was written by Emily Post in 1922. It was called “Etiquette—In Society, In Business, In Politics, and At Home.” It became a best-seller and paved the way for her successors to continue preaching good manners.

Emily Post was succeeded by Amy Vanderbilt. Her contribution to American good manners was “Amy Vanderbilt’s Complete Guide to Etiquette.”
Soon other etiquette guru’s followed, including Letitia Baldrige and Judith “Miss Manners” Martin, whose tongue-in-cheek columns led to the publishing of several books on etiquette, including “Miss Manners Guide to Domestic Tranquility”, which she published in 1999.

Today, Peggy Post, the great-grand-daughter of Emily Post has thrown her hat into the good-manner ring. Her book is called “The Etiquette Advantage in Business: Personal Skills for Professional Success”, and she has branched out onto the World Wide Web, dispensing her rules of modern good behavior to anyone with a computer and a modem.

So with all these good books being written, what has happened to good manners and common courtesies? Where did we begin to lose the human touch in our behavior?

With advanced technology we have lost much of our humanity. We spend so much time manipulating a mouse and pushing space bars, keys and buttons, we don’t have time for human conversation or an awareness of the people around us.

Fortunately, we are now beginning to see a return to traditional social values and there is an increasing awareness of the importance good manners has in our culture.

Even in business, executives are seeing the importance of good manners. Business is the largest social environment in the world. Our rapidly expanding global economy forces us to socialize and conduct business at the table more than ever before. It is in this setting that manners play a major role in developing relationships. There is no better, or possibly worse, place to make an impression.

Today, many big businesses employ etiquette trainers whose job it is to teach good manners to executives. Etiquette trainers not only show business people how to dress and act – how to eat and converse in proper company – but they also train them how to become more successful in their companies and in the business world by helping them develop better communication skills.

With the global society becoming much closer, executives having a background in societal and cultural differences have a much better chance not to offend as well as a greater success rate if they can demonstrate good etiquette skills. As Peter F. Drucker, the well-known writer, management
consultant and university professor, said, “If you don’t think globally, you deserve to be unemployed . . . and you will be.”

As our world becomes a smaller place and our economy becomes increasingly global in scope, it is becoming clear how important good manners are in all cultures.

Do manners really matter in the twenty-first century or are they merely a stale leftover from another era – not to be taken seriously or of any great consequence? They do matter, and they matter greatly. Why? Because we are in danger of losing our civility, not to mention our sense of fair play, our consideration of the feelings of others, and our regard for all those seemingly small gestures that can make life so pleasant.

While we may never return to the days of the well-composed, error-free, handwritten letter, how we treat others continues to be critical in our daily lives.