

## Trade Show Etiquette 101 for Reps and Execs



You can send your workplace questions to Stephen at: [StephenSays@bellow.press](mailto:StephenSays@bellow.press)

Questions selected to be answered, will appear in this column. Please use the Subject: Stephen Says for all emails. Stephen Viscusi is a bestselling author, television personality, and CEO of The Viscusi Group, global executive recruiters located in New York. Follow Stephen on Twitter @stephenviscusi, Like Stephen on Facebook; and follow him on LinkedIn.

Dear Stephen:

*I am a principal and the director of design (one of many) at a very large global architectural interiors firm. I am an architect by education, but commercial interiors are the main focus of my work and the team I lead. I must admit I am sort of a trade show junky. I'll go to both residential and contract shows. I like them all. I just feel like it keeps me fresh.*

*I'm coming off a crazy few days where I started at WESTWEEK 2018 in LA then went back east to NYC where I headed straight to the Architectural Digest Design Show. I'm already looking forward to ICFE in NYC and, of course, NeoCon in Chicago. Sometimes I head to these shows*

*with clients or colleagues, but I'm just as happy to go by myself. For years, I would put together reviews of the all the showrooms at these expos, and while I'm really there for the products, I would spend a substantial bit of these reviews discussing the reps.*

*Yes, I know most people only talk about the product, and I know people go to the shows to see the products, but I can't help myself. A sales rep can make or break a showroom experience for me, just as much as the new showroom or booth design, or even the product.*

*For the most part the reps are attentive and engaging, and I*

*guess I like being a little catty and judging them and their showrooms. For years, I loved watching the sales reps and executives from corporate who man the booths or showrooms, walking around with their coffee or chewing gum, doing their best to stand out. Tacky as it is, to me the best booths and showrooms always have been where the reps all dress alike, in denim or something else. You've seen it. Once at Janus et Cie they all wore white smocks, like at a cosmetic counter in Bloomingdales. I couldn't believe it. If selling furniture isn't difficult enough, leave it to these companies to make you dress like a makeup counter salesperson. I wonder if*

*they have to still do that at Janus since Haworth bought the company?*

*Those were the good old days. I would go to the shows have fun, laugh a lot and leave feeling good. Today, I see every rep or corporate executive at every booth and in every showroom on their cell phones. No one pays attention to me anymore, they are just texting, looking at Instagram, reading the news or doing whatever else. How can they get away with this? Surely these companies have protocols and rules for their reps in booths and showrooms, right?*

*I understand they are not teenagers, so no one is going to yell at them, especially when their bosses are doing the same thing, but something has to change. The coffee cup has been replaced by the smartphone. As a customer I find it rude and annoying. I know I haven't always been particularly kind to these reps, but I have paid to travel to the trade show to see and hear about the new products. I want their full attention. Is that too much to ask?*

Signed,

**A Critic**

Dear Critic:

I know you are trying to be helpful, and I see your point, but it is mixed up with a bit of cheekiness that makes you sound like Joan

Rivers (God rest her soul) on the red carpet. I bet you wouldn't like it if someone were to call you a decorator, right? The denim shirts and smocks? Yes, I have seen them all. But guess what? I find it helpful. It's always easy to know who works where when they all wear the same thing. If you are one of the sales reps or from corporate, it is often easier to have a uniform because people know who you are and approach you.

That said, I think it's important for those of you who work in the furniture industry to approach your work with clear eyes. An occluded view of the people we're working with helps no one. There are some pompous, dastardly people — as there are in any high-end consumer environment — there's no benefit in pretending there aren't. Even people you don't like can be customers, though, and need to be treated as such.

One thing I do agree with is the cell phone stuff (unless you are reading BoF on your smartphone, of course.) Any rep slumped and huddled with their face in their phone, is a rep who is not making the most out of the trade show. I often hear from reps that they need their phones because they're in touch with customers who are trying to find them in their huge showrooms. Some showrooms also want their reps to let executives know when certain customers walk in.

Again, as a different customer, I should never even know that text is going out. If I see you on your phone, you're doing something wrong.

In fairness, at some of the smaller shows, like Arch Digest's, there are independent owners working there, and what they do with their time is their own business — it might be bad business, but it's their own. At larger events like NeoCon or even ICFE, though, for the life of me I can't understand why manufacturers do not have some sort of training for how to act properly.

ICFE is coming up in May, then the hospitality show in Vegas and then NeoCon. Manufacturers, get the hint. I'm talking to you. You can't only blame the reps if you're asking them to be on their phones to do work. Still, your customers pay to come to these shows to see your product, and they expect reps to dote on them. This means they shouldn't be looking at their phones.

As terrible as this critic is, I hate to say, the critique is fair. And by the way, it is the same conversation we all have at home at night with our partners. Any time we're off our smartphones is time we're paying more attention to our loved ones. At trade shows, your customers are your loved ones, and a wise man once told me: The customer is always right!

**Stephen**