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Just what's needed: the gift of good manners

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If Emily Post were alive, she'd celebrate her 135th birthday today. And although the details of the etiquette maven's advice have changed -- white gloves are no longer required -- her advice is still relevant, says Anna Post, her great-great-granddaughter, etiquette guru and author of *Emily Post's Wedding Parties*.

"What I say would be the new generation of what she'd say," she says.

Today is also the unofficial start of holiday party season, with many a Halloween-costume bash taking place after dark tonight. There'll be plenty of family get-togethers, office parties, social-club soirees and gatherings among friends between now and New Year's -- which means plenty of sticky situations that pose the need for a refresher on basic manners.

So, in honor of the original etiquette maven's birthday, we've asked modern-day experts to stand in for Emily to help you avoid holiday gaffes. Here are answers to nine common etiquette questions regarding this time of year.

Organizing a dinner

My spouse's sister always has Thanksgiving dinner at her house. We'd like to bring up the possibility of having it at our home. How should we broach the subject?

As early as possible, Post says. "It's OK to suggest a change to tradition, but you don't want to pull a surprise on someone at the last moment. Right now, October, is not the right time to do it."

Devin Moss, one of the men behind the Web-based etiquette gentleman Oliver Mims and www.properollie.tv, says flattering the host never hurts. "I wouldn't recommend saying, 'You've done it for 10 years, and now it's my turn.' Say, 'We

would like for you to be our guests so you don't have to do as much of the work. We really want to show you we appreciate the wonderful meals and conversation you've provided for us."

My boyfriend wants us to have all of our friends over for Thanksgiving dinner. I can't stand one of his best friends and certainly don't want to cook for the man. What do we do?

You remember that your significant other is important to you and you invite his friend over. Unless you want to star in a new movie called *How To Lose Your Significant Other in 24 Hours*, says Francesca Beauman, the author of *Everything But the Kitchen Sink: What Every Modern Woman Needs To Know*.

Moss says, "Think of it as food you would have just thrown away, if that helps."

Bottom line: You don't get to choose your significant other's friends. You do have to tolerate them, says Colleen Rickenbacher, Dallas-based etiquette expert and author of *Be on Your Best Business Behavior*.

I'm having vegetarian friends over for a holiday dinner. How many vegetarian options should I add to the menu?

One or two dishes should suffice, as long as one of them can serve as the main course. If the diet is particularly tricky, Post suggests that you tell the person that you won't be offended if they bring something they're certain they can eat.

As long as your friends can see that you've made an effort and won't feel like second-class citizens, the meal should be fine.

I've been invited to Thanksgiving dinner. The hosts didn't specify that I should bring something, but I feel weird showing up empty-handed. How do I contribute without (possibly) messing up a planned menu and offending the host or hostess?

Our experts suggested bringing a hostess gift instead.

"Never, ever, ever show up empty-handed," Rickenbacher says. Bring a bottle of wine, an expensive bottle of soda or fizzy apple juice, or some other treat your hosts can enjoy later if they choose.

Gifts and thank-yous

I have a lot of friends who aren't Christians. Can I still send them a Christmas card?

Sure. If you know they don't share your religious beliefs, though, sending them a general "Happy Holidays" card would be more thoughtful.

I'd like to give a gift to my teenage nephew. I think he'd like cash best. Is it OK?

The experts expressed dissension here. Post said that, unless family tradition forbids it, you can go ahead and give cash during those impossible teenage years -- as long as thoughtful card accompanies it. Moss suggests that a gift card might be better, and both Rickenbacher and Beauman advise against cash-only presents.

It's my first holiday with my significant other's parents. Should I buy them a gift? What's appropriate?

The four experts we asked agreed that you should take a gift. They suggested bringing wine or a nice bottle of liquor, after you've made sure that they drink. Fresh flowers, a book or a tasty edible, such as chocolate or jam, also work.

Rickenbacher suggests investigating whether either parent has a particular hobby or collection.

But Beauman cautions not to go overboard. "If you look like you're trying too hard with the significant other's parents, it sets off wedding bells in everyone's ears."

I'm having my first family dinner with my significant other's parents. Are verbal thanks enough or should I send a thank-you card?

Anna Post says with absolute certainty that Emily Post's advice applies here: Always, always, always send a thank-you card.

Beauman suggests picking out a card with special meaning and writing three to four sentences expressing your gratitude.

Party introductions

My office Christmas party is coming up. I'll recognize co-workers whose names I won't remember. How do I avoid awkwardness?

By biting the bullet and being honest. If you don't remember a name, smile and put your winning personality to good use by saying something like, "It's so lovely to see you, but I'm terribly sorry I've forgotten your name."

Or Post says, cheat by saying, "Hi, I'm Anna. I see you in the hall all the time, but you probably didn't know my name." The other person will likely return the favor.

What you want to avoid, Moss says, is conversing with someone for an hour and then being unable to introduce him to a friend who joins you.