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IN THE KNOW

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POs (initial public offerings) are tricky enough without fumbling the all-important first press conference. "Many companies mistakenly wait until the last minute to craft the corporate message," says Merna Skinner of Exec-Comm, a New York communications training organization. They then come across as lacking in confidence, she says. To avoid verbal missteps, Skinner offers these tips for spokespeople:

- Be sure of your information and be ready for questions.
- Clarify your message with preplanned points.
- Determine in advance what cannot be discussed.

ILLUSTRATION BY KEITH NEBLEY; PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTOPHER HARTING

No Free Lunch

Finessing the mealtime meeting

You won't learn it in an M.B.A. program, but negotiating a business lunch can be the trickiest part of wooing a prospect. To make a solid impression, you'll need more than the good manners your mother taught you, says Laurie Kahn, CEO of STAR (Staffing, Training and Retaining) with offices in New York and Chicago. Knowing which bread plate to use is important, of course, but business dining has its own specialized rules.

Kahn points out that often newer managers, consultants and salespeople feel the most confused. As guests, they often wonder what to order and whether they should reach for the check.

As hosts, their discomfort increases with challenges such as selecting the right restaurant to fit the occasion, maneuvering around the menu and jockeying to see who should order first.

Meanwhile, they wonder what to talk about — and not talk about. When is it OK to start discussing business? And who grabs the check?

If you are a hesitant host, Kahn suggests giving your guests a choice of spots in your price range, asking first if they have any eating preferences (you don't want to steer a vegetarian to a steakhouse). "But don't ask them where they would like to go, unless you have an unlimited expense account," she cautions.

Since the purpose of business dining is to build relationships, you should be ready with some open-ended conversation starters. But hold off on shop talk, at least until coffee — and don't pull out your laptop. "Do the presentation back at the office," says Kahn. "It'll be more effective if you use lunch to get to know the person." And the check? The host picks up the tab, says Kahn — and leaves the tip.

