

Waiter, Is That a Lobster on My Shoulder?

by Marisa D'Vari

Do you have a card?"

The question sounds innocent enough, spoken between sips of Chardonnay at a cocktail party, but actually is loaded with meaning.

Business cards have a long and illustrious social history and from their inception, served to underscore the wealth, prestige, and artistic taste of the sender.

In Europe and America during the pre-telephone eighteenth century, callers would deposit their personal card on a silver tray, with a specific corner bent to indicate the very same messages shoppers see when confronting a myriad "get well soon" or "happy birthday" cards in the local Hallmark or drugstore today!

In Japan, cards still are exchanged with solemn attention to ceremony, with both parties pausing to carefully read the information, and bow with acknowledgement before returning to their conversation.

In today's business and social circles, a richly designed card still goes a long way to underscoring your authority and expertise. But a new trend is developing which has stumped many social experts: personal photos on business cards.

Is it a good thing, or bad?

Emily Post probably would never approve for social situations. But many professions have used pictures for years with tremendous success, such as real estate agents and professional speakers. The pictures feature these individuals in their best, most trustworthy light. It's said that we choose our books by our covers, so why not our professionals as well?

Sounds reasonable, except that there are two liabilities with picture cards. The first is that your recipient might think you egotistical. And the second, even worse, is that you'll turn off a potential client because he or she just doesn't like your looks. This has nothing to do with personal attractiveness, but rather, may be based on the potential client thinking you look like his wife's brat sister or the bully who beat him up in junior high.

To buck this way of thinking, some savvy self-promoters might use a bit of humor in their pictures as a way of getting around the issue and to increase their own brand awareness at the same time. For example, Chef Kevin Gaudreau, formerly of Maine's upscale White Barn Inn, uses a photograph of himself with a lobster on his shoulder in publicity pictures. Why not put it on his card?

Sommeliers can be photographed sipping wine, writers snapped at their keyboards, firemen rescuing cats from trees.

Which paves the way for the most arrogant and strident members of our society to go to the ultimate extreme and use pictorial sarcasm on their cards, such as Donald Trump with a wrecking ball and crew behind him.

The decision of whether to add a picture to a card is an individual one, dependent on the city in which one lives, one's profession, and one's tolerance for teasing. But in competitive fields, it may very well give you the edge you deserve.

