

The Business Review of the Eric Rosenquist Institution

Draft Copy ~~ Confidential

HOLD ON, I'LL BE RIGHT BACK~~Do you know what to do when there's no hand towel? That's only scratching the surface. An expert argues for restroom break contingency plans.

by Eric Rosenquist

You're at a power lunch. Millions are on the line. They're all tough players they said you'd never get—and you got three. They like you, you're a straight shooter with plans. And you've had a great lunch to boot. But if there's not a single question on your mind, there should be. It's on theirs.

THE SCENARIO

You think your deal is in the bag. But how many deals coalesce into their bagged form without so much as a wrinkle? A number of studies show that not all do. How precisely yours is about to land squarely on the floor *will* come as a shock, for it runs counter to our deep intuition. Intuition is the last flower to be uprooted, but should be the first, like a kudzu.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, I'll be right back." What is about to happen will have disastrous consequences. Five minutes later you return. Their faces have changed. Their manner is subdued. You notice subtle changes in their conversation. Next thing you know, you are telling your boss that your deal of the century will not be one for the centuries. Killed as soon as it would be born, yet another casualty of corporate infanticide.

Rewind.

How could you have done anything differently? One might argue that you *had* sealed the deal, but the glue was drying. You had read their faces, shaped their moods—in fact, kid ourselves not, forged a new frontier on your common ground. But then their mood soured, and with it fell the barrel of apples. The objective question is, how does one's mood sour?

Intuition is the last flower to be uprooted, but should be the first, like a

kudzu.

Argue as we might with the propriety, those three gentlemen did no more than notice that you visited the restroom. Furthermore they waited and waited, envisioning why precisely they were made to wait. You had brought them together as strangers, they had not known each other before. At the three minute mark, like clockwork, they had remarked on all the trends they would care to remark upon. The inner workings of their businesses suspiciously withheld from one another, they might have been tongue-tied but for the discussion that was your demise.

"What do you suppose is taking so long?" Patterson wonders aloud. He was the crux of your long-term supply strategy, your strongest ally in dealing with the others. Now a different long term has made him summarily into your worst enemy. The irony is not lost on you.

What you failed to realize was in the depths of their souls, perhaps in the back of their minds, they were nervous. Who would crack?

It would not be unreasonable to estimate that most people will not urinate during a business engagement. The pain of "holding it in" is negligible for urine in face of the not insignificant social calamity you might risk. And you may rest assured that the others drank no more wine than was necessary, or just a cautious 5% beyond their understated limit, and certainly not an abnormal amount of water, which carries far less social consequence. (Above-average water consumption also carries the risk of excessive attention to that particular glass by the waiter, unnecessary awkward thanks to the waiter before silent, glaring eyes, or worse: an exclamation of guilt from the waiter for his underestimate of your water rate. For a sobering analysis in greater detail, see S.F.N. Bohut's 1998 existential study of the perhaps laughable approach of discretely pouring half the water from a colleague's full glass into yours, or siphoning it with a small tube under dim light.) As a corollary, it is quite unwise to take risks with spicy food, for not only would one run out of water at an abnormal rate both in the estimation of the waiter and the other diners, it would set the stage for all the risk of a trip to the restroom.

All the same, urination is not unacceptable, and is rarely prolonged. It need not grow into an incident. A gamut of steps may be taken to completely deflect all attention.

Mathematically the only question is,
whom is its victim?

We knew back in 1983 that ordering the same food as someone else had subtle negative ramifications that could be uptraced to ultimate social failure conditions. Thus, like clockwork, your meal selections were all different. You numbered four. A probability analysis would show that a diarrhea incident was almost inevitable. Mathematically the only question is, *whom is its victim?* One person and one alone might be expected to fall, the one

with the fatal entrée. How more tragic still it might be were it to befall the glue that held the group together. With 25% odds, clearly one cannot afford not to take the possibility into account.

THE RESTROOM—AN OVERVIEW

The restroom of a restaurant is a far cry from the pristine, predictable, familiar environment of an office washroom. Its familiar locking door, its non-knob door lever, its high quality disposable hand tissue—any of these might be sadly absent. In all but the most exclusive restaurants with reservation lists a year long, it might be possible to book two reservations, the first solely to inspect the restroom. Though it might seem a frivolous afternoon or evening of fun, perhaps even with a spouse or colleague, this visit is dead serious. You have to know what you face, the timings, the fixtures, the contingencies. How many people are in the restroom on a given day? How many people would it take to introduce delays beyond a threshold? It will be clear seeing a large number of people in the stalls that this restaurant is not safe—if it does not claim you, it could leave a lasting and painful memory on one of your dinner guests. Like a date, a business dinner is all business. One bad experience, a flat tire, a spilled drink, can irrevocably usurp from us our sole chance at happiness in life, which has its analog in business.

There is almost no end to the possible scenarios. Suppose the boss has to leave suddenly and comes into the restroom to tell you, "We need to continue this another time." What will he remember about you the next time? Suppose someone else from your party enters the restroom after you, or you realize you must go before he has come back? You know you are both paying attention to who finishes first, and you are both listening carefully. You have some leverage to manipulate this situation, avoiding an awkward encounter at the sinks, or perhaps creating one deliberately. This takes advantage of the imprecisions in the ability to monitor other people's excretion. The timing must not be too suspicious, but it is somewhat at your discretion.

If you are leaving at the same time and see each other, you must ensure that you either both wash your hands or neither wash your hands. You cannot be morally faulted for not washing your hands because you saw the other person just as clearly. However, there is another side to this: suppose you lose a deal because the other guy tells his boss that you didn't wash your hands. You will never get a chance to tell his boss that he didn't either—you probably won't even know he told him. This might not seem right, but it is the hard truth. One must also weigh the risks of washing one's hands when the other person does not, as this may be seen as a hostile assertion of moral superiority. The bathroom is a complex place.

BLOWING AWAY THE COMPETITION without wiping up afterwards

Is there a hand blower, a towel dispenser, or both? Are the hand towels of a low grade with almost zero absorbency? Do you see people blow drying their hands the entire length of

time you are there? The single greatest point of unpredictability in the restroom is hand drying. The reason hand drying deserves such serious consideration is that your eating companions, whether your guests or your superiors, know where you have just been. Alongside the serious gaffes of leaving the fly unzipped and emerging with toilet paper stuck to one shoe, the presence of moisture on the hands, or wet spots on the shirt or pants, is an obvious embarrassment of the highest magnitude. Our society, staid and mature as we might desire it to be, remains a society of taboo. And OR scrubs, with their stainproof microfibres, have not been adapted by significant suit designers. One might recall the disastrous exchange in the film *Rushmore*. Luckily hand drying is also the most tractable of the possible problems. If you have no idea what drying apparatus to expect, you need not fear: the catch-all is drying them on your pants—but not just anywhere. Water at the top is quite visible, and titillates the adolescent instincts of even the most elderly executive as urine droplets spring to the facile mind. Instead the bottoms of the pants, ostensibly splattered by walking through puddles, get not a glance, nor any attention. This scheme constitutes the cutting edge in hand drying.

For perhaps excessive added caution, one might also consider not washing one's at all. In this case, actual urine stains may be safely deposited at the base of the pants as well. In the situation in which the restroom is within earshot of the table (dangerous for other reasons), it is essential to run the water in the sink to avoid arousing suspicion, whether or not any water ever touches the hands. There is no sequence better ingrained in the mind than the roaring flush of a toilet followed by the rush of water in a sink; deviation from this sequence is easy to spot. If there is only a hand blower, be prepared to run the blower as well, and pause a reasonable amount of time before emerging from the bathroom. Someone else from your party might have seen the blower already, or might see it later and remark that they should have heard it earlier when you "washed your hands."

Our society, staid and mature as we might desire it to be, remains a society of taboo.

KEEPING YOUR FLY ZIPPED

There are two possible disastrous outcomes of leaving your fly unzipped. It is inevitable with the near universal vigilance of the entire western world that one of these contingencies will arise. It is not so clear, however, which is the worse of the two.

One of your companions might shed his or her business clothing and warn you about your fly. If you were hoping to cultivate some business relationship with that person, you can say goodbye to your chances before you even look down at your crotch. A person in a high place must not be known to put on pants one leg at a time, or to zip them up, or the crucial aura of esteem evaporates. And sex, gender, whatever you want to call it, escalates the stakes further. No man can live down a fly warning from a woman, whose place in the workplace gives way to her traditional place, with him at her mercy. She has something he wants, biologically as well as financially, and though it be unprofessional for him to seek it from her, it is fair game for her to hold it over him in the form of permanent subtle psychological unrest, ignominy, disgrace. A woman with an unzipped fly or a curious

element such as an unbuttoned blouse becomes at once an inept child whose gender should never have been allowed to leave the home. As much prestidigitation one might care to engage in, women will never have a fair place in the world, plain and simple, because of such risks. It is already bizarre enough that she does not wear men's shirts, but instead garments with nonstandard buttons, clasps, non-crotch zippers. Her power, ability, dignity aside, she can command no further respect if her nontraditional body and clothing display the slightest flaw. Such is the harsh reality of zippers.

The other perhaps more intriguing possibility is that one or more people will notice the unzipped fly, making a mental note—and in the worst case, discussing it with others. Human dignity is a force to be reckoned with, but it falls away with a single knowing glance from one person to another. In pants we may find a microcosm of society itself since time immemorial.

There has never been one definitive solution to the fly problem. The author can only recommend an amalgamation of three or four techniques to depress the probability of a cataclysm. It may not be possible to get a business suit with an elastic waist and no fly. In several years, if it does not take firm hold, this design may be obsolete as people learn to spot such pants, which may become an object of ridicule. Thus it is critical to combine psychological training, subtle maneuvers, technology, mirrors.

One might find it totally unacceptable to invest money in an electronic zipper detector. The market for this product has not heretofore developed enough momentum. Such devices are relegated to airline catalogs and are manufactured by whoopie cushion-calibre companies, if they exist at all. Technology, alas, has not caught up with society in this regard.

The author is a recognized expert on fly checking. Any encounter with a mirror or glass door, any private moment to reach down or glance, any opportunity to regard a cell phone in the lap area, is a prime opportunity. One must check twice before leaving the house, twice in the car, once on the way in, but this is not enough! One trip to the bathroom and all this effort falls away. And subsequent checks on the way out may have to be more furtive, less separated in time and less diverse.

CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps as little as fifteen years ago we were accustomed to thinking of meals as a tidy affair, an easygoing perk of the trade. There has been nothing short of a sea change in recent years. Now we are eagerly seeking to investigate every aspect of the peculiar interpersonal dynamics of the hearty repast. Any business graduate worth his or her stuff nowadays has been given, at the barest minimum, intensive etiquette training. This has raised the stakes, to be sure. One might be tempted to march on, giving to the new game as much as one can muster. A run-of-the-mill professional might go his or her entire career without questioning what drives the wandering upward course of the interpersonal zeitgeist. But one need worry no further, this is a specialization reserved for a fatalistic breed, who would inexplicably sacrifice the intensity of a career to teach others. A closer look at the work of

cutting-edge theorists bespeaks punctuated equilibrium—in the new dynamic, a major push to investigate and harness some groundbreaking approach is made once in a long while, and the business world struggles to catch up until the next tidal wave of change. The author would argue that the next juggernaut is east over the horizon—and we are moving at a fast clip.[][][]]

Eric Rosenquist is a graduate of the University of Texas at Austin. His maverick research and endless supply of theories quickly catapulted him to the forefront of his field. He was a speechwriter and campaign strategist for 2000 presidential candidate John R. Wazghav, bringing a fresh outside-the-beltway perspective to the business of American politics. Vicissitudes, contingencies, and semiotic are all in his vocabulary.