

Polishing Professionals

Academic work led to new career teaching how to be businesslike

By Susan Schwartz

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Their handshakes were firm, their outfits simple and businesslike: dark skirts, low-heeled pumps, simple, well-cut jackets. **Lynda Goldman and Sandra Smythe Thibaudeau** made an excellent first impression.



But then, they have the know-how. They're in the business of helping people to create good first impressions, to present a polished, professional image. They give seminars in business etiquette, correspondence and communication: social skills for the workplace, in a way. Clients include Pfizer, Microcell Solutions and the accounting firm Richter Usher & Vineberg.

The partnership began a decade ago- in a whole other place. Smythe, who has a graduate degree in applied linguistics, was a longtime teacher of English as a second language, based at Concordia University. She was looking for a collaborator to write a textbook on the subject. American and British texts dominated the field and Smythe wanted to write something which reflected Canadian culture and concepts.

Goldman, a junior member on staff, agreed to participate. She went home that night and got to work on the first chapter. "A live one," Smythe remembers thinking.

The book, published by Prentice Hall Canada, broke ground in the Canadian market and became an instant hit. Goldman's artistic eye - she has a fine arts degree - made it attractive. The writers' hands-on teaching experience made it effective. And they both enjoyed the creative outlet.

They went on to write five more books in the series, called Canadian Concepts. Two more series for Prentice-Hall followed, then one for American publisher Houghton Mifflin, "Amazing Stories to Tell and Retell."

Customers included immigrants, colleges and university adult-education language programs. All the books became bestsellers and the pair toured the country, giving scores of presentations to train teachers in using them.

Canadian Concepts, aimed at immigrants, addressed cultural issues. Cultural adjustments can be profound for immigrants, Smythe explained. In some countries, for instance, it is quite acceptable to turn up at 8:30 for dinner when you were invited for 7; Canada is not one of them.

Sometimes we would have professional students who were not being given their due because they had different social customs," said Smythe, 58. "We saw that language

teaching was more than teaching language. "And I guess it gave us a natural predisposition to make the leap to another area."

They were growing restless. After 27 books on teaching language, written weekends and evenings over almost a decade as they continued to teach full time, they'd said all they had to on the subject. When an offer came in from another American publisher, they turned it down.

They had something else in mind: teaching people skills they need in the workplace but don't necessarily learn in school - or anywhere else. Many students, the pair realized, were graduating with good academic and technical training but not a lot of "soft" business skills: how to behave in a job interview, what to wear, how to navigate a business meal. And it wasn't just new graduates: while promoting their language books, they'd meet publishing salespeople eager to learn new skills to help them advance in their careers.

"We saw a need," said Goldman, 48. And they believed that, as experienced teachers, seminar speakers and writers, they could meet it.

"It seemed like a place where the skills we had built over 10 years could be put to use," Smythe said. Two years ago, it's what they started to do.

In the 1990s, she had coordinated ESL courses in continuing education at the Université de Montréal. She'd met many students who were already employed, taking courses with an eye to improving their job situation, and she couldn't help noticing other areas that could stand to improve: how they dressed, for instance, and presentation skills.

She and Goldman had developed a business English test for the university's business school, École des Hautes Études Commerciales, and they interviewed thousands of students. "We saw ambitious, bright kids, yet they'd meet us and some would be chewing gum," Smythe recalled.

"I think there is nowhere in this society that teaches social skills. We all think we're teaching the stuff at home. But we don't have the community we used to where everyone knew everyone and parents all had the same behavior.

When she was asked to develop a business communications program at the HEC, it's no coincidence that Smythe included such topics as presentations, personal appearance and meeting protocol. She remains the program's pedagogical coordinator, a part-time position.

And before too long, the two were writing together again. "How to Make a Million Dollar First Impression," self-published last June, is a readable, thorough guide to how to behave in almost any business or social situation. A French language version came out this month.

Lynda Goldman and Sandra Smythe Thibaudeau's weekly series of workplace tips called First Impressions debuts today. The first of a dozen installments appears here.

Six tips to help you ace the job interview

Before your next job interview, take a few minutes to prepare, both physically and mentally. When you appear confident and relaxed, you'll be much more likely to land the job you want. Here are a few tips to help you present a polished, professional image.

1. Remember that your physical appearance is your visual resume. Interviewers form an impression of you before you have a chance to say anything. Make sure you are appropriately dressed and impeccably groomed.
2. Be prepared so you don't have to search for things under pressure. Organize your papers, have a pen and notebook handy, and know where your business cards are.
3. Arrive about 10 minutes before the interview. If you arrive too early the interviewer may feel rushed. Needless to say, never be late for a job interview.
4. When you meet the interviewer, smile, make eye contact, say your name and shake hands.
5. Be careful not to take over the interviewer's space. Keep your briefcase or purse on your lap or on the floor beside you. Don't spread your papers over the interviewer's desk.
6. At the conclusion of the interview shake hands again and thank the interviewer for taking the time to see you. Send a brief "thank you" note the next day. It will set you above the crowd.