The Style Guy's Guide to Friendship, Schmoozing, and Social Advancement

He's been telling GQ readers how to dress and behave for eleven years. But Style Guy Glenn O'Brien's true expertise may be the art of social navigation. So take it from the man who has always made sure he's in the right circle. (Hell, he had a new-wave talk show! His boss was Andy Warhol!) On the occasion of his new book, 'How to Be a Man,' we asked O'Brien for modern advice on how to win friends and influence people—while making sure you're always moving up

LIFE IS A EUPHEMISM for social climbing. There's no shame in deliberately scaling the social ladder. That's evolution. We are social animals, and we thrive in the company of others. Finding the best others we can is part of the natural-selection mechanism, and it's far safer than rock climbing. And getting to the top of society is like getting to the top of Mount Everest, except you can stay there, usually in comfort. It's an adventure. It's exciting, like sport. If you fail, you don't die; you simply relocate and start over.

We often hear the platitude of cynics, "It's not what you know but who you know." I get it, but it's a bit facile. It's what you know, who you know, and what you know about who you know and what who you know knows, too. Not to mention knowing what else and who else you ought to know. Is that clear?

We are all social climbers, whether we know it or not. It is possible to engage in this necessary activity with taste, discretion, and even ethics, as long as we are aware of what we're doing.

I remember, some years ago, I became enraged briefly with the professionally impertinent writer George Wayne, and he said with touching sincerity, "Don't be mad at me, Glenn. You are a very important rung on my ladder." I was totally disarmed. I couldn't punch him in the nose, because I was laughing too hard at the truth spoken so bluntly.

There is no shame in rising in the esteem of one's fellows (and of course of the ladies), so let's not be shy about social climbing. What we really mean to avoid is engaging in vulgar means to facilitate one's rise. Ideally a rise in society is a sort of feat of levitation. I like to think of social climbing as a profane analogue of the Rapture, when Jesus returns to scoop up his peeps. One day you may look for us and we'll be gone. Possibly to heaven, but even better to Mustique or the Hôtel du Cap.

1 ▶ It's good to stay friends with exes if possible. Miss Jones and I still adore each other. [With Grace Jones]

2 ▶ Always buy drinks and meals for rich people; since no one else does, they'll notice. [With David Bowie]

3 ▶ Don't be afraid to express all your personalities.

4 ▶ It's normal to like co-workers. Where else is a workaholic going to meet anyone? [With Madonna]

5 ▶ If possible, use the VIP entrance, as Wendy and I did at Studio 54. [With makeup artist Wendy Whitelaw]

6 ▶ Never assume that beautiful people are not equally outstanding in the brains department. [With Deborah Harry]

One-upmanship

The term originated with a popular 1951 book by Stephen Potter that detailed methods of creative intimidation by which the apt pupil might ascend the social ladder, and this sportive approach to life is even more popular today, though rarely spoken of in such terms. The premise is that society is a sort of contest—what we might see today as a reality show—in which we are all contestants. We rise in society by outsmarting those at our present social level in order to rise to the next.

You could regard our personal social agendas as a form of warfare, but I prefer to think of them as a game. Rather than killing off my fellow contestants, I prefer to put them on "injured reserve." In this game of life, each encounter becomes a contest in which one may emerge triumphant. Or not. As in any protracted endeavor, you win some and you lose some, but hopefully in the end our no-holds-barred enthusiasm mediated by good sportsmanship will take us to our goal—whether it's fame and wealth or simply the esteem of others—by the most amusing means necessary.

"I played that course. With Ben Crenshaw."

"Oh, that's a great job. I just couldn't take the pay cut."

"Yes, she was Miss India, but I couldn't stand the way she talked to waiters."

Like that.

Socializing Is Work

I was rather young when I found myself in the entourage of Andy Warhol, then the most famous artist in America and my boss. He liked to drag along to parties a group of attractive young employees and hangers-on to make him seem younger and sexier and maybe give him someone to talk to as a fallback. When he turned to me at a party and said, "This is such hard work!" it struck a nerve. I had never thought of parties as work before; I have never thought of them as not work since. This is where you shine, where you put your best foot forward and catch new eyes. Successful partying will give you a chance to jump the queue, advance directly to Go, and collect $200.

Since Parties Are Work, Take Them Seriously

It's okay to be the life of the party. It's okay to clear the dance floor with an amazing display of footwork with a sexpot partner; it is not okay to clear the floor by stumbling or projectile vomiting. One should never be visibly intoxicated at a party, just as one should never appear to be a wallflower. Get up and mix. Introduce yourself to the people you want to meet. It's okay to have a pocketful of business cards, but if you wind up giving one out at a non-biz event, write your mobile or personal number on it so you don't seem to be doing what you're actually doing.

Don't Underdress

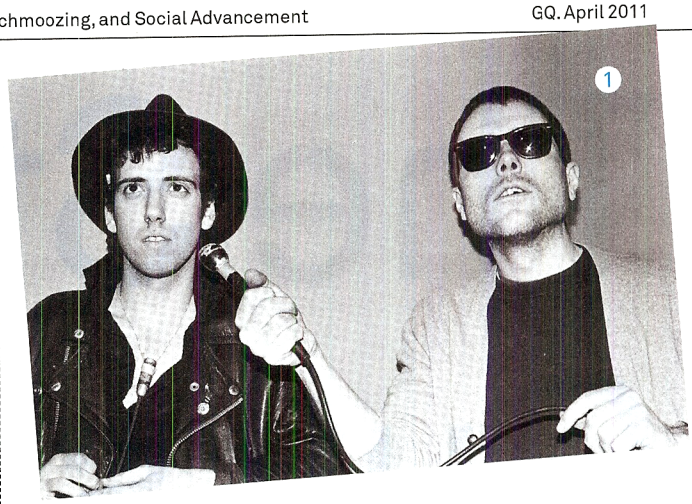
It's better to be overdressed than underdressed. People will assume you are going to or coming from something better.

Don't Overstay

I like to go to parties early. That's often when the VIPs arrive for their brief appearance, and it's often the best time to get in a word with significant persons before they become insensible. If you stay too long, it will appear that you have nothing better to do. It's okay to make an appearance. The exception is at seated dinners. You can make an appearance at cocktails, but once you're seated, you're stuck. If you leave after the appetizer, you're leaving two people with only one person next to them. Bad form.

What Are Friends (in the Age of Facebook)?

Ideally, a friend is someone you have actually met, someone you like and spend time with, although it is possible



to establish a friendship through correspondence, particularly if one party is incarcerated. Traditionally, friendship required time; it demanded a certain intimacy that was not granted instantly. Today, however, thanks to the social networks' digital exploitation of loneliness, horniness, and ambition, it is now widely believed that it is possible for one's résumé or curriculum vitae to become friends with other people's résumés or curricula vitae. A friend is a person, not a set of data. *Friend* is best used as a noun, and the uptick in its use as a transitive verb is unfortunate and hopefully a fad. I do not wish to friend or be friended, although I don't mind the occasional befriending.

Friendship with Louts, Cads, and the Far Less Than Perfect

A young colleague asked me, "Well, what about being friends with a dick, an asshole, or a pompous bastard?" I was a bit puzzled by this at first, but I think that's because younger people tend to hang in a crowd, and there are those friends who sort of come along with the group. As we get older and more intolerant, we become more independent of the posse and demanding of friends. I have, over the years, maintained some surprisingly lengthy friendships with seriously flawed persons, but in the end they have to get with it or just git. Ask yourself, is he getting better or getting worse? If he's getting worse, cut him loose now; he's probably terminal. Then ask yourself, is this scumbag worth the effort? If, after careful consideration, the answer is yes, the next step begins—"Listen, you asshole"—and from there you begin to explain the ways of the world in plain language.

Reaching Friend Capacity

When you've lived in New York as long as I have, you practically have to forget someone old to know someone new. There comes a point when one's social network is simply saturated. Usually it's not a matter of consciously dropping people; friendships tend to fall by the wayside when not maintained. And as life is change, sometimes a friend becomes irrelevant through no fault of his own. It's the old growing-apart syndrome. This is the natural order. Don't fight it. Embrace change. Retire the old address books.

Parties Are Society's Sacrament

When I was young, it was common for people to entertain friends at home, and this was known as a party. It is the perfect occasion for social levitation. On some occasions, a room or a club might even be hired to accommodate a crowd. But as I got older, I found that more and more a party was a business event that featured an open bar until a certain hour. This is not a party, but sometimes it's all we've got.

Someone has to advocate for the finer things in life, so throw an exemplary party—for no particular occasion. Invite some people who don't know

OPENING PAGE, THIS PAGE, AND OPPOSITE PAGE: SEE ADDITIONAL CREDITS.

but will enjoy one another. Tell them what to wear, but don't say "casual," say "sexy" or "Rat Pack." When they ask what they can bring, say, "Just a good mood." Do not talk business, and if you hear it being talked, nip it in the bud. Mandate dancing or games. Take pictures. Flirt. Take a walk on the wild side.

What If You Hear That a Friend Has a Party and You Are Not Invited?

My wife says that we moved out of the Hamptons because you couldn't have a dinner party without everyone we knew feeling that he or she should have been invited. I don't want to have to move again, so allow me to state that the best dinner parties are small, intimate affairs and that unless you tend to keep to yourself, it's very likely you will not be able to accommodate all of your friends at once at dinner. Two dinners for eight are more fun, and much easier, than one dinner for sixteen. The guests will be able to interact with everyone, and it will be easier to do the dishes. It will also allow you to accommodate your friends who hate each other. But you first must understand that when you are not invited to a friend's party, it doesn't mean he or she doesn't love you anymore; it only means that you are not in on this particular evening.

Name-Dropping

There is simply no way around it. Sometimes you have to drop a name in the course of telling a story or relating a parable. When name-dropping is required, do it right. Use the last name, too, and you won't sound quite so ridiculous. Quentin, Jude, Jack, Kirsten, Gwyneth... Don't make me guess. You're enough work already.

Name Forgetting

Always choose a significant other with a better memory for names than yourself. If you find yourself alone and panicked at a familiar face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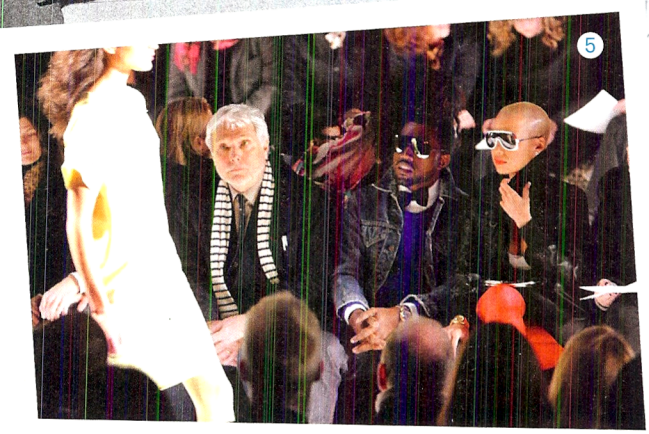
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1 ▶ People remember a good listener better than a good talker. [With Mick Jones]

2 ▶ Never judge a person by his clothes or his act. [With Alice Cooper]

3 ▶ You meet more people if you are on TV.

4 ▶ I gave Andy those sneakers. Nobody likes something free more than a rich friend. [With Andy Warhol]

5 ▶ Always try to sit in front. You meet interesting people. [With Kanye West]

6 ▶ Always be on the lookout for people who remind you of you. [With Jean-Michel Basquiat]


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1 Try to make friends from other countries, cities, and boroughs. [With Fab 5 Freddy]

2 When you have a party, don't just round up the usual suspects. [With Katherine Ruby, Walter Steding, Kate Simon, Robert Fripp, Chris Stein, Deborah Harry, and Edwige Belmore]

3 There's no shame in being newsworthy—somebody's gotta do it.

4 Heavy drinkers often know more than one would expect about wine. [With Shane MacGowan]

5 People love theme parties. This was *TV Party*'s Honor America Night. [With David Byrne]

whose name escapes you, grab a hand and say, "You look fantastic!" It will never occur to your acquaintance that you have no idea who he or she is.

Divorce

It's likely that this year, at least one of your friends will get divorced. Often the best policy in the divorce of friends is to imitate Switzerland and stay the hell out of it. It's okay to be sympathetic, but going beyond "I'm sorry" might lead someone to believe that you are taking his or her side. Even if you are considerably more in sympathy with one party, it's best to remain nominally neutral lest you end up a sobbed-upon shoulder or an evidence giver. Even if you despise a friend's spouse, take care. Start telling him how awful you've always thought she was and they will reconcile before you know it.

When a Friend Takes Up with Someone Awful

A man of a certain age sometimes finds one of his peers abandoning his charming, cultured, and perfectly serviceable first or second wife for a fling or, worse, a trophy. A man so occupied is not in his right mind. He is hypnotized, in a sexual trance.

Do not oppose the new relationship. Challenging your friend's judgment will just get his defenses up. He will think you are jealous, no matter how appalling she is. Just damn with faint praise. Tolerate her with good humor, but do not form a direct relationship with her. She might be hot or she might be evil incarnate, or both.

When a Friend Drinks Too Much

Do unto others, etc. But if it's getting to be a bore, you might say something. I prefer mockery to concern. It's cooler and more effective. If you think making fun doesn't get the message across, you're wrong. "You left something at my house last night." "I did? What?" "Your dignity." I call it "zero tolerance with a twist."

SEE ADDITIONAL CREDITS.

When a Friend Stops Drinking

Try to ignore it. I don't mean that you should push alcohol on a sober (even temporarily so) friend, but don't make it a topic with him or your mutuals, and don't drop him because he's not as much fun anymore. Just carry on normally. If he's going to AA, it's none of your business—the second A is for Anonymous. I make an effort not to try to push my old friends off the wagon, although once or twice I've had a slip and said, "How the hell long do you want to live, anyway?"

Omertà

I wouldn't go as far as the Sicilians, but I do believe in not informing on one's friends unless your silence will do harm to the friend and/or society. I'm not entirely against gossip, but I generally stay away from it unless I feel that there is something positive and productive about passing on a particular tidbit. Ironically, displaying unusual discretion and an unwillingness to dish the dirt will lead more and more people to provide you with the most salacious inside info. I'll only loose my lips if I want to sink a ship.

Punishing Friends

Everyone misbehaves. And people change, not always for the best. When our friends behave badly, we want to do something about it—first, because we care about them, and second, because they've pissed us off. Sometimes friends have to be punished. Once punishment has been doled out, we can see if they have responded to our treatment and then decide how to proceed.

Shunning is when one's former friends and associates cut you off, and it was perfected by many religious groups. Today the Scientologists are quite good at it. But you can also shun individually, and that means not speaking to someone and avoiding contact with him.

Generally I prefer the cold shoulder, which is informal. You deny that you are shunning, pretending instead that you are simply very busy. You don't come to the phone or return calls. You can answer e-mail with an old out-of-office message, preferably dated several weeks earlier.

Former Friends

Nothing makes for enemies like friendship gone wrong, love turned to hatred. I know Jesus advised loving one's enemies, but I believe that when he said turn the other cheek, he actually meant "Ignore the motherfuckers!"

This requires complete indifference. The former friend must become completely invisible; his presence or existence is not acknowledged. I would even recommend that you do not even speak ill of him, as it will make you seem petty, jealous, or slighted. Take the high road—you can't see him from up there.

Once you have practiced shunning, you get good at it. Not long ago, I was seated at a dinner near someone I had not spoken to or acknowledged in nearly two decades. We participated fully in the same conversations but never once spoke directly. That's civility.

When one's enemies are mentioned, simply dismiss them or change the subject. "Oh yes, the former writer. I just don't think she's funny, but she does, and I guess that's the important thing."

Enemies

Having the right enemies is as important as having the right friends. It shows you have standards and guts. But like friendship, hostility should be one-on-one, not a group thing. Do not proselytize your hatreds. Don't expect your friends to support your animosities. If an enemy's name comes up, just say, "We don't speak." That speaks volumes, and you may leak further details intriguingly as years go by, artfully revealing the flaws of your nemesis without apparent rhetoric.

Revenge

A dish best served cold and al dente. As long as you get even before death, you win. A brilliant revenge may even carry on beyond the grave. Why do you think they invented wills?

Friends and Intimacy

Having your friends stay in the guest room is intimate enough. Fucking friends is simply not done.

Famous Friends

I have been friends with plenty of famous people. I treat them the same way that I treat anyone else, except that I won't give out their numbers or give them a message from you. In a few instances, I have ceased being friends with a famous person precisely because I did treat him like anyone else. Like when a rock star (at whose wedding I was best man) called at 4 A.M. I said, "Never call at this hour." Couldn't take it—even though I had saved him from falling down the basement stairs drunk. Many friendships have a "sell-by date." The ones who are still my friends are still famous, by the way. Some of the others are teetering.

Socializing as a Family Man

When you grow up and get married and have kids and get divorced and go to jail or whatever happens when life gets complicated, you may find that you have less time for your crew. This is as it should be. The family, at least the one you put together, is the basic unit of society, and it should get the best of your attention. Your friends, you may be surprised to discover, can get by fine on your spare time, even if you don't think you have any. We have a saying around here, "It's a school night," and truth be told, most nights I'd rather be home. Parties are work.

Friend Factions and Mixing Them

There will always be cliques. It's bad to get stuck inside one. Get out more. Mix. Even rub your cliques together. Split them up and they release energy, just like atoms.

Transgenerational Friendship: Mentor and Mentee

I have friends of numerous generations. Transgenerational exchange is one of the most essential processes in society; this is how great companies and empires are built. We are mentored as youths, and in maturity we mentor. But at the same time, we can laugh at the same jokes and collaborate in meaningful enterprises. I'll write the manifesto, kid; you write the code.

Reaching the Top

You may think that you have it made and be tempted to enjoy yourself. But if you look down, not only will you be confronted with the dizzying prospect of the abyss out of which you have clawed your way, but also you will behold hordes of younger and perhaps abler climbers nearing the summit, all intent on displacing you sooner rather than later. Look about you at the other masters of the universe and try to ascertain which of them will attempt to toss you over the edge first; make friends with them and discuss who really doesn't deserve all this. You often hear that it's lonely at the top, a sure sign that the speaker isn't there yet. I have a feeling that it's actually very crowded at the top—at least until Satan sneezes. If this situation makes you nervous, phone below and sell your spot to the highest bidder while you still can, and then jump, pulling the rip cord on your golden parachute as you yell "Geronimo!"