

Internet Etiquette Better Communication Through Courtesy

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Make no mistake—Internet communication is here to stay and in the business world it's time to learn how to do it right. But who's making the rules? When writing an e-mail, does strict business letter etiquette apply? Or is it more like a phone call or sticky note? Should every instant message close with your name? When are you crossing the line with forwards and blogs (online diaries)?

Experts—yes, there are e-etiquette experts—agree on a few main points when it comes to cyber communication. Common courtesy and practice of the Golden Rule top the lists. This includes always writing a concise subject heading which describes the topic of the current e-mail (not the one you wrote six months ago and have been sending back and forth). Unless it's vital to maintain a flow of thought through a number of prior messages, attach only the most recent and delete the rest.

Although it need not be formal, always include a salutation and closing with e-mail. Most e-mail tools have an automated signature function which will attach a pre-written name, title, company name, and other contact information to your outgoing mail. The “netiquette” experts also agree that more than five signature lines is a waste of time and resources. For example, include the phone numbers for all your European and Asian offices only when necessary, not for every reader.

Another common courtesy is to avoid all caps when typing; capitalizing an entire word or words implies to the reader that you are yelling and is considered impolite. It can also be confusing, and makes the e-mail difficult to read.

It defies reason that written communication can be misinterpreted, but e-messages are usually composed and read in haste which can cause problems. My former pastor always

wisely advised face-to-face communication on touchy issues because without voice inflection and body language, emotional words are easily misinterpreted.

One “netiquette” expert advises using emoticons—or smileys—to avoid miscommunication. If I write, “That was easy,” and include a red-faced emoticon, you could be fairly sure I was being sarcastic. Without the smiley, you might think I was serious, or even bragging.

Just the Facts, Please

Forwarding of jokes, gossip or personal business have no place in a work environment according to Ann Marie Sabath, author of “Business Etiquette: 101 Ways to Conduct Business with Charm & Savvy.”

“Using the office e-mail system to circulate jokes, pass along nonwork-related gossip, or conduct other private correspondence is unethical and may cost you your job!” she writes. “It can usually be tracked—even if you press ‘delete’ after sending your message...your company may be liable for information—or disinformation—that ‘leaks’ into the far reaches of cyberspace inadvertently.”

If you're prone to use e-mail forwards as a way to make the world a better place, please resist. No dying child wants your get well cards, the FCC is

not planning to nor does it have the authority to tax your e-mail, nobody has awakened in a bathtub of ice after someone stole their kidney, and Madalyn Murray O'Hair is not using her influence from the grave to make it illegal to say “God” on American airwaves.

You have not been “specially selected” for anything.

If you still want to believe the exciting forward you've just received, resist the urge long enough to go to www.snopes.com and check its “urban legend” status. (If you've ever received an i-Pod for sending a forward to your friends, let us know and we'll print a retraction.)

If you can't help yourself and must share something, don't include your entire address list in the TO: field; rather, learn to use distribution lists or send blind carbon copies. Of course, never forward a private message without the sender's permission.

Nothing is Sacred

Be realistic about the fact that nothing you put on the World Wide Web is private. Private posts are not private. Private e-mails are not private. I tell my children that if they have any political aspirations they need to be very, very careful what they blog, or e-mail, or write an instant message about, because it may come back to haunt them. Those

Mind Your Phone Manners

Cell phones. Voice mail. E-mail. They're great for increasing business productivity, but cause endless irritation over proper usage. The technologies are simply too new for hard and fast rules to have developed.

“We are too quick with our approach to the cell phone. We are loud and abrupt,” said Alinda Lewris, president of the International Association of Protocol Consultants.

Guidelines are definitely needed, and like all etiquette, technology protocol is based on politeness and consideration for others. Who is going to overhear your conversation, or get mad when you ignore them in person to talk with the disembodied someone on the phone? How busy is the person listening to your voice message?

Just be considerate, and you'll do OK.

That means turning off your cell phone, for example, or at least set it on vibrate, when you're in a meeting or during a business meal. Other places where taking cell phone calls is considered rude is on airplanes, theaters, libraries, museums, churches, and hospitals. If you simply must take the call, go somewhere private, then keep the conversation brief. Don't discuss anything you mind others hearing. And keep in mind that you always tend to talk louder on a cell phone than a landline phone.

Keep voice mail succinct and direct, but provide enough context so the recipient understands your message. State your name and company immediately, of course, but repeat your name—along with your phone number—at the end. Be sure to provide a time window when you're sure you'll be available for a response.

(Courtesy NASE's “Entrepreneurial Connection.”)

“private” words are alive and well on a server and most likely will be for a very long time.

My embarrassing experience involved some rather confidential medical results I was sharing with my sister via e-mail. Not minutes after I hit “reply” to send her the news, I received a couple sheepish notes from strangers pointing out I must have hit “reply all” with my news bulletin. Sometimes you just need to pick up the phone—or better yet, a pen and paper.

Instant messaging provides an even more looming false sense of security than e-mail. It seems like a phone call or face-to-face conversation, but don’t forget that those words are still out there when they disappear from your screen.

So is instant messaging appropriate in the workplace?

According to emilypost.com, 65 percent of respondents felt instant messaging was a “useful and appropriate business tool,” and 35 percent felt it was inappropriate or rude. Those who approved said it was less distracting than phone calls and a good way to get information quickly around a large workplace. Those who did not like it compared it to “someone barging into your office without knocking.”

If you are an avid IM user, here are some “Golden Rule” points to consider:

- Never respond to or read messages when someone is in your office or while talking on the phone.
- Turn off the sound feature, especially in an open work space.
- Use your status message to alert others when you don’t wish to be disturbed.
- Turn off all messaging while in a meeting.

We all turn to our children with technical questions about the Internet—but with etiquette questions it’s probably best to ask your grandma. Mine would say think of others first and you’ll do fine.