

Are Bad Technology Manners Costing You Money?

by Donna Hickey

Over the past 20 years advances in technology have made men and women more productive than ever before. Cell phones, PDAs, and the wireless Internet allow us to take our work everywhere. The result has been a culture in which everybody is "on" all the time. We still put in long hours at the office, but it's just as likely they will be finishing that last-minute report on the bus come at a restaurant, or at home.

And while this convenience is a blessing, it's also a plague. That's because many people use these technologies as an excuse to leave their otherwise good manners on the shelf. By abusing their gadgets – not to mention the people around them – they don't just come off as rude, they risk losing clients, contacts, and money. With that in mind, I like to offer a baker's dozen tips on using technology productively. While most might seem like plain common sense and etiquette, any of them can keep you in the good graces of the people you do business with:

Pay attention. For all the great things technology has given us, there have been some troubling side effects. The worst of these is the tendency to split our attention. Studies have shown again and again that our performance suffers when we attempt to multitask. And yet, it's not unusual to see a so-called productive person try to talk on the phone, type email, and eat lunch all the same time. If you really want to get something done, then concentrate on getting it done. After that, you can move onto the next thing.

Put people first. If there's another human being standing or sitting in front of you, deal with them first. Few things are as insulting as trying to hold a conversation with someone who's taking calls, texting, or checking their email. You might think that kind of behavior makes you look busy and important, but what you're really saying is that you aren't interested.

Use your inside voice. We've all been standing near that person who felt the need to shout into their cell phone, and it's not a pleasant experience. There may have been a time when you needed to talk loudly to have people hear you, but thankfully those days are gone. Keep your conversations to a normal volume – or lower if possible – and resist the urge to shout.

Find the off switch. There are some places, and times, where it's just not appropriate to be fiddling with your cell phone or PDA. While meetings and movie theaters are obvious examples, this also applies to elevators, restaurants, and other public settings. Nobody wants to hear your ringtone during the opening credits, or worse, be subjected to the details of your private conversation.

Along those same lines, be sure you understand that off means "off," not "silent" or "vibrate." You might think that turning off your ringtone is enough, but a shaking cell phone is still disruptive, and so is someone punching away on tiny buttons while everyone else is trying to concentrate.

Better yet, leave it home. Somewhere along the way, we all seem to have picked up the notion that just because we can be reached at a time, that we should be. But there's something to be said for being "unplugged" and just enjoying our lives. Unless you're on the verge of a crisis, vacations, intimate

dinners, and important meetings should be off limits to anyone wanting to interrupt. And even then, they should only call – and you should only answer – for something that's incredibly important.

Use conservative ring tones. You might think it's great to use the latest heavy metal hit or hilarious animal sound to let you know about incoming calls, but to other people, it's annoying and unprofessional. If you want to be taken seriously, let your ring tone sound more like a phone call and less like a street carnival.

Texting and driving don't mix. We all know that drinking and driving is a bad combination, but many of us turn a blind eye to the difficulties of texting while we're in the driver's seat. Talking on your cell phone without a headset is bad enough; taking both your hands *and* your eyes off the road is incredibly dangerous.

Don't accessorize. The newest trend seems to be people wearing Bluetooth earpieces and other headsets, *even when they're not on the phone*. There are several reasons why this isn't a great idea – and looking ridiculous is definitely one of them – but I'm going to stick with the communication angle. When colleagues see you wearing an earpiece, it's hard for them to tell if you're on the phone, available to talk, or commanding *The Enterprise*. Show them you care what they have to say by taking out your earpiece when you don't need it.

Think before you hit "send." Over the past few years, a number of high profile people – from Fortune 500 board rooms to the White House – have discovered that emails are rarely ever private, and that they can have a very long shelf life. Remember that and treat them accordingly. A good rule of thumb is to never write anything in an email that you wouldn't want to see on the front page of a major paper. And certainly think twice before you say anything disparaging about your boss, client, or coworker. Messages have a way of finding themselves in new and exciting places, even years after the fact.

...or "forward." Do you remember when it was cute or fun to receive emails from your friends with cute pictures of cats or inspirational messages to pass along? Neither do I, or any of the people we both know. McAfee, the software company, recently released a study that showed millions of men and women are spending more than three hours every week tending to their inboxes. What they need is more time, not another digital chain letter. Sending mass messages encourages people to block or ignore your emails, so keep those notes to yourself.

Stay on subject. Email is supposed to be quick and to the point. If you have so much to say that it can't be expressed in a few paragraphs, then ask yourself whether picking up the phone wouldn't be faster and easier. Few things are as disheartening as opening an email, only to find page after page of black text. Who has the time? At the same time, be judicious with your email subject lines. Give a quick description of what you need to say, not the opening stanza to *War and Peace*. And never use words like "urgent" or "emergency," unless you really, really mean them.

Be clear, not cute. In an effort to save time and be fun, we've butchered the English language in unimaginable ways. But while your spouse or roommate might LOL at your witty message, there's a chance your supervisor or CEO won't. Write messages the same way you'd shop for a good suit – think of the job you want, not the one you have. Being able to write clear, coherent messages might not remind

your boss of how young or trendy you are, but it will separate you from the masses who don't seem to know the rules of basic communication.

Add a human touch. With the dozens of ways we have to get in touch, people sometimes forget that nothing beats a face to face meeting. Not only are they good for any relationship, but lots of issues – business and personal – can be solved a lot faster that way. That's because tone, context, and emotion, which are all difficult to express electronically, come out naturally when we get together in person. If your friends or colleagues can't remember what you look like, then chances are that your work and career are suffering for it.

As you consider these tips, I want you to keep something in mind: *they matter!* We've become so accustomed to using technology as an excuse to be rude that we sometimes forget that there is, or ever was, another way to get by. But one of the biggest problems any businessperson can face is that of establishing a real connection with his or her customers, supervisors, teammates and subordinates. By granting those people the small courtesies, we show them that they matter to us. That respect is crucial to earning their business and support.

People like to do business with people they know and like. That's been a fact for a thousand years, and it isn't going away anytime soon. Rude behavior can still cost you the career you want, even if your offences are committed via Blackberry, so follow these tips and you might just find your byte-sized headaches replaced with real-world success.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Donna Hickey is an executive trainer and business strategist specializing in real estate and organizational direction. Over the past three decades, she has conducted keynotes and workshops for Fortune 500 clients in North America and around the world. As an active member of a number of professional organizations, she blends humor with insight to cut to the heart of today's strategic challenges.

You can learn more about Donna, including information about her keynotes and workshops, at www.donnahickey.com, or by calling her at 708-807-9260.