

Telephone Tips for Up-To-Date Execs

The past 15 years have ushered in a flood of new telecommunication products and services. And with so many ways to reach out and touch someone, there are also increased opportunities to rub someone the wrong way. "It's not the technology that's rude, it's how it's used," says Hilka Klinkenberg, president of New York's Etiquette International, a consulting firm that counsels businesses on such matters. Whether you're communicating with someone by satellite feed or via two cans and a string, good manners make an important difference. No matter how advanced, the communication is only as civilized as the communicator.

Take the matter of telephone calls. It's just as rude to talk on the phone and eat as it is to chat and chew simultaneously in person. People aren't impressed that you're working through lunch if they have to listen to you do it. And don't assume that your voice sans food is so distinctive that you don't have to announce who you are. "It's terribly presumptuous not to introduce yourself," says Klinkenberg. It also puts the person on the other end of the line in the awkward position of guessing who the heck is calling. After an appropriate introduction, get to the point. "Be crisp, be clear, and don't waste time," says Letitia Baldrige, former chief of staff to First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy and author of *New Complete Guide to Executive Manners*. Indeed, for most busy professionals, rambling discourse is about as unwelcome as a root canal.

INFURIATING. Also, it's condescending to have an assistant place your calls for you. "The message you're sending is that the person you're calling isn't important enough for you to take two seconds and dial them yourself," says Klinkenberg. Besides, she continues, it's infuriating to receive a call and then be asked to hold for whoever is calling. It's bad enough to get put on hold when you've made the call yourself.

As for call waiting, a telephone service that allows subscribers to take a second call while putting their first caller on hold, "it's very, very rude," says Baldrige, particularly if "you're asking a person you have called to hold." It's slightly more acceptable to interrupt someone who has called you in order to answer your other line. But if you do so, it's advisable to stay with the second caller just long enough to say: "Forgive me, but I have to call you back," according to Baldrige.

When it comes to caller ID, which identifies who is calling or has called your number while you were away, it's uncouth to return calls to callers who didn't leave a message. "If they wanted to hear from you, they would have asked you to call back," says Nancy Friedman, a St. Louis consultant known as the "telephone doctor" because of the phone-manners seminars she conducts for such large companies as AT&T and Procter & Gamble.

CHIRPS IN CHURCH. Cellular-phone users, who usually have important reasons for having a cell phone, need to be savvy about when and how to take calls. When the phone rings during a meeting, a meal, or any other personal interaction, "discreetly excuse yourself and take the call outside," says Friedman, rather than holding the entire group hostage to your conversation.

Etiquette experts agree that leaving a cell phone activated--whether or not there's an emergency--so that it chirps during church, the movies, concerts, theater performances, lectures, or funerals is the height of solecism. If you must stay connected to the outside world in these situations, get a pulsing pager that will silently alert you to incoming calls. And refrain from shouting into a cell phone in public areas, such as street corners, grocery stores, hotel lobbies, or while you're using public transportation. "You can intrude on another person's space with your voice as well as your body," says Klinkenberg.

"I'M NOT HERE." There's protocol to voice mail, too. Don't announce in your outgoing message: "I'm not here right now." That's obvious. "Try and avoid those kinds of irritating redundancies," advises Klinkenberg. Instead, briefly instruct callers to leave a message and, if possible, tell how they can reach you in person if the matter is truly urgent. "You always want to give people an escape valve so they don't feel like they're in voice-mail jail," Friedman says. You also might call your own voice mail once in a while just to see how easy and convenient it is to get in touch with you or to leave a message.

Furthermore, record with a smile. "There's not a radio announcer in the world who doesn't know you sound better--and people are more likely to respond--when you smile," Friedman says. For that matter, it's not a bad idea to wear a cheerful expression when leaving a message. But more important, always know what you're going to say before the sound of the beep. "You should not be surprised when you get [put on to someone's] voice mail in this day and age," says Klinkenberg.

To prevent a dreaded round of telephone tag, don't hesitate to relate enough information so that the recipient doesn't have to call back for clarification or more information. However, refrain from recording really bad news (i.e., "your dog died" or "you're fired"). It's unkind, and it's just "not done," says Friedman.

Remember, no one likes to sift through a bunch of relatively unimportant telephone messages on his voice mail. So, if your message isn't time-sensitive, consider E-mail. "The phone is a more urgent means of communication than E-mail," says Elizabeth Powell, who teaches management communication at University of Virginia's Darden Graduate School of Business Administration.

Manners mavens disagree on the issue of returning calls. Baldrige unequivocally says: "Return every call, even if you can't stand the person," while Klinkenberg feels "the onus to complete the call is on the caller." No one, however, disputes that it's unwise to ignore people's messages, voice as well as electronic, because "there may come a time when you may need for them to call you back," says Klinkenberg. Anyway, there's no law that says the call has to be returned when the other person is there. Try lunchtime or early in morning if it's someone you really would rather not reach.

The key to tactful telecommunication is being considerate. If getting put on hold, receiving hangups on your voice mail, or abrupt E-mail messages bug you, then don't do the same thing to other people. "It's amazing that the ones who complain the loudest about rude behavior are the worst offenders," says Klinkenberg. It doesn't matter whether the communication is in person, person-to-person, or person-to-machine-to-person, practice the golden rule for an untarnished image.

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