



Manners Matter

By Kevin Kelly

The impeccable Miss Manners on why proper netiquette is good for you.

Sit up straight, folks - Miss Manners is here. She has mastered her voicemail, got control of her cell phone, and now she's logged on to the Net.

In real life, Miss Manners's true name is Judith Martin. For years she's written about excruciatingly correct behavior for all those moments when the modem is not on; now she has a few interesting things to say about the wired life. For example, people who don't give a hoot about sending thank-you notes are suddenly bent out of shape when they get an email message typed in ALL CAPS. *Wired* spoke to Miss Manners and asked her, very politely, how etiquette is bringing civility to the online frontier.

Wired: What is it about cyberspace that has rekindled interest in etiquette?

Miss Manners: Freedom without rules doesn't work. And communities do not work unless they are regulated by etiquette. It took about three minutes before some of the brighter people discovered this online. We have just as many ways, if not more, to be obnoxious in cyberspace and fewer ways to regulate them. So, posting etiquette rules and looking for ways to ban people who violate them is the way sensible people are attempting to deal with this.

Do you find online etiquette rules parallel the rules of etiquette offline?

Yes. Spamming is the equivalent of boring people or mixing in business. Flaming is the equivalent of being insulting. You may not realize how annoying it is when you ask an obvious question to a group that has been meeting for a while. So etiquette refers you to a FAQ file. I'm delighted people are doing a good job on the Net.

To sort out the correct behavior when corresponding through technology, you suggest the body is more important than any disembodied communication. Somebody sitting in front of you should take precedence over just a voice - like a phone conversation. And a voice takes precedence over a further disembodied email. The more disembodied the communication is, the less precedence it has. Is that fair?

Yes. And it is disobeyed flagrantly. The interesting thing is why people think that someone who is not present (a phone ringing) is more important than someone who is. Generally it has taken a person a lot more effort to come to see you than to call you on the telephone.

Let's see. I need some advice. Email has an alarming proclivity to be copied. What are the rules for passing on private email?

For email, the old postcard rule applies. Nobody else is supposed to read your postcards, but you'd be a fool if you wrote anything private on one.

Most people are not writing their email that way.

That's their mistake. We're now seeing email that people thought they had deleted showing up as evidence in court. You can't erase email. As that becomes more commonly realized, people will be a little wiser about what they type.

You're very much of a stickler for keeping one's business life from intruding upon one's social life. That distinction online is becoming more blurred all the time. There seems to be a deliberate attempt to mix these two up - working at home, for example. Is this the end of civilization as we know it?

Blurring the two is not conducive to a pleasant life, because it means that the joys of being loved for yourself, and not for how high-ranking you are or what you can do for other people, quickly disappear. People who are downsized, for instance, find they've been dropped by everyone they know because they don't have real friends. They only had business acquaintances. One of the big no-nos in cyberspace is that you do not go into a social activity, a chat group or something like that, and start advertising or selling things. This etiquette rule is an attempt to separate one's social life, which should be pure enjoyment and relaxation, from the pressures of work.

You favor old-fashioned salutations in written correspondence: Dear So and So ... Do you use salutations in email?

Email is very informal, a memo. But I find that not signing off or not having a salutation bothers me. I am waiting to see if this is just a fuddy-duddy vestige I should divest myself of.

Let me make a confession here. I've come to the point where if someone expects a response from me, and they send me a letter in the mail, I almost consider it rude. I know I'll get my knuckles slapped for admitting this, but they are requiring me to find a piece of paper, a stamp, go down to the mailbox, and so on. Let me put it this way: If I want a reply from someone, I'll do it by email if possible. It's more considerate of their time.

Of course I disagree with you. First of all, not everybody is on email. Second, there are communications that do not belong on email. Email is not the means by which you tell someone that you want to marry them, or that you want to fire them.

At the moment email is predominantly informal. I wonder if it will eventually carry the formal as well.

The mistake people keep making is that if they find a wonderful new tool, like email, they have to give up all others. They don't. You have simply added another very useful means to your communications repertoire. Another great error is the presumption that etiquette has a cutoff point, about 1875. But in cyberspace people talk about etiquette all the time.

Is this because etiquette is just common sense?

No, etiquette is a voluntary bargain we make to live peacefully together. It's not something you can figure out through common sense. You have to learn it.

So is etiquette a substitute for laws in advance of lawyers and politicians?

No. We have two regulatory systems: legal and etiquette. The legal system prevents us from killing each other. The etiquette system prevents us from driving each other crazy.

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