

On Netiquette

by Melanie O'Kane

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What we type is who we are. Unless a video conference is in session, mannerisms, facial expressions, body language, and cute little idiosyncrasies cannot be used to communicate with others online.

If I sent an e-mail to you that read, "You are a freak," the chances are very good you'd be confused and instantly offended. But if we were in a face-to-face, nonprofessional (social) setting and I called you a freak, I would include a laugh, wink or smile to indicate my jovial intent.

Many of us, including me, use smiley faces or ("smile") within electronic messages to indicate the same meaning. However, smiley faces can't erase an otherwise offensive message. It's all how the reader reads it. Transcripts are a perfect example. Therein, sarcasm quickly turns into findings of fact, and even the smallest words can come back to bite you. Can you tell me what the definition of is, is, Mr. Clinton?

Speaking of Mr. Clinton, one must tread carefully in a world where everything is archived, recorded, and cached away for future reference. Today is the information age, a time where much of who we are is determined by the words we type.

- Assume that sending electronic mail is as secure as a sending a real postcard.
- Always respect copyright laws.
- When forwarding or re-posting a message, do not change the wording of the original message.
- Forwarding electronic chain letters, jokes, or cute pictures of baby animals only helps spread adware, spyware, viruses, worms, and other electronic parasites that lie within. These seemingly harmless e-mails are modern age Trojan horses.
- Don't send heated messages (flames) even when provoked and do not respond if you get flamed.
- Always include a contact information signature line at the end of your message. People like to know with whom they are corresponding.
- Address mail carefully, particularly when a single address is a distribution group.
- Don't send unsolicited e-mail. If you market and advertise online, be sure to adhere to the guidelines set forth in the CAN-SPAM Act of 2003. Visit the Federal Trade Commission's Web site for more information (<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/online/pubs/buspubs/canspam.shtml>).
- In this global economy, people you do business with will be located in different time zones. Immediate replies will not come from someone who is still asleep.
- Your recipient is a human being whose culture, language, and humor have different points of reference from your own.
- Sarcasm travels very badly. Unless you are sure that the recipient of your message is fully aware of your intent and shares your feelings on the matter at hand, avoid it at all costs.

- Use proper punctuation and grammar in every message you type.
- Use mixed case words; UPPER CASE IS SHOUTING!
- Bold, underline, and italicize for emphasis.
- Wait overnight to send emotional responses to messages.
- When replying to a message, include enough of the original content matter to be understood. Add a <snip> or ellipses where information has been edited out for brevity.
- The subject must reflect the content of the message.
- When chatting online, always say goodbye, and wait for a response farewell before ending the session.
- Unless the rules of the medium state otherwise, advertising is generally unwelcome.

Usenet and Listservs

- Read one to two months' mailing lists or newsgroup postings to understand the culture of the group.
- A large audience will see your posts, including your clients. So take care in what you write. Additionally, mailing lists and newsgroups are frequently archived, so your words can be stored publicly for a long time.
- Be brief and to the point; don't wander off-topic or ramble.
- Don't send mail or post messages solely to point out other people's errors in typing or spelling.
- Subject lines should follow the conventions of the group.
- When you reply to messages or postings, do not accidentally send a personal response to a great many people as this can be embarrassing. If this happens, send an apology.
- Do not use delivery receipts, non-delivery notices, and vacation programs with mailing lists.
- When in disagreement with one person, make a personal email response (not to the group). But when debating a point on which the group might have some interest, summarize there later.
- There are newsgroups and mailing lists which discuss topics on a diversity of lifestyle, religious, and culture issues. Posting articles whose point of view is offensive to the group is not acceptable. Sexually and racially harassing messages may also have legal implications. Use software to filter items you find personally objectionable.

Bottom line, do not virtually behave in a way that is different from how you would behave in person. Practicing good netiquette makes all the difference in how your readers see you.

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