

Commonsense Etiquette for the Digital Age

I have worked in technology most of my adult life. In the 29 years since I decided to return to school to learn to be a computer programmer, I have watched as the “user interface” has evolved from punch cards to iPads. There is no denying the magnitude of the technological transformation that has taken place in three decades. Yet I find myself wistfully wondering about the impact of that technology on a generation that has come of age blissfully ignorant of a time before texting and Facebook. A segment of my own generation seems to have used the abundant availability of technology as an excuse for an egregious lapse in social manners! A recent My View column about “Head downers” got me thinking about commonsense etiquette for the digital age.

The digital age's transformational hallmark is the instant access to information and the immediate availability of friends, family, and associates. Whether it's a parent and child's ability to reach the other in an emergency, a stranded driver on a deserted road being able to call for help, or just an absent-minded spouse's ability to be reminded of what they were supposed to pick up at the store; the availability of instant communication has been an enormously time-saving (and in some instances, life-saving) enhancement to modern life.

Digital Etiquette rule number one: *The opportunity for instant communication should not be confused with the necessity for constant communication.*

Standing in a store checkout line may be tedious and seem like the perfect time to catch up with your friends. But once you come face-to-face with the cashier, GET OFF THE PHONE! Unless you are calling 911, common decency requires that you disengage from the call and engage with the human being in front of you who is trying to help you.

Being updated on your phone with breaking news can be exhilarating, and the fact that your phone can let you know every time a new update arrives can be extremely useful.

Digital Etiquette rule number two: *Participating in life requires attention. if you are checking your phone, you are not paying attention*

I attend many meetings where “participants” spend a great deal of time checking their phones, or looking at their pc or tablet. When I point out their rudeness and state that if a meeting isn't worth paying attention to, maybe it isn't worth having at all, they take offense and usually mutter something about multitasking. I insist that people attending my meetings (those I have control over) participate “in the moment” and pay attention to what is being discussed. They can check their messages when the meeting is over. This delayed gratification of an hour or less rarely proves fatal!

The digital music revolution has enabled me to access my entire 500+ album music collection at any time. Audiobooks have transformed the drudgery associated with routine tasks into opportunities for intellectual stimulation. The enjoyment of books and music can fill every minute of every day.

Digital Etiquette rule number three: *the person in front of you deserves at least as much attention as the piece you are listening to.*

Trying to have a conversation with someone with earbuds or headphones on is like talking to a toddler. First, you have to get their attention, then you have to repeat what you just said. Being in your own little world can be enthralling when you are alone. But if someone is trying to talk to you, take the earbuds out!

While by no means exhaustive, these three simple rules, if followed, could return a measure of civility to human interaction in the digital age.