

Netiquette: Minding Your Manners Online and the Art of E-mail

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The ability to send e-mail is one of the greatest conveniences to come along in the past few decades. With a computer, Internet access and an e-mail account, a user can send messages to dozens of people at the same time without having to incur expensive postal charges. Messages can be transmitted across state and national boundaries and are received in a matter of minutes, instead of days (or even weeks, in some cases). And you can send and receive messages whenever you want; people are no longer bound by traditional office hours, illegible fax copies and busy signals.

While the spontaneous nature of e-mail and the Internet can raise the level of interpersonal communication and the exchange of ideas and information, it also has a nastier, more dangerous side. Since there is a lack of face-to-face communication, many users feel safer saying things they wouldn't say to someone in person. Others may be put off by a message's tone, so that what is intended to be a compliment may actually offend a reader. And occasionally, users may be subjected to junk e-mail messages or outright personal attacks.

There are a number of factors regarding etiquette and protocol that need to be observed when sending e-mail. Before going over some of the do's and don't's of e-mail, there needs to be a better understanding of what these terms mean and how they apply to the average user.

Netiquette, Spam, and Flaming

Netiquette, in a nutshell, is the Internet's version of etiquette. As the tone and protocols of the Internet change so does netiquette. Usually, however, it's still based on the premise of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

The need for a sense of netiquette arises mostly when sending e-mail, posting a message on a newsgroup, or conversing in a chat channel. To some extent, the practice of netiquette depends on understanding how these aspects of the Internet actually work or are being practiced, so a little preliminary observation can go a long way. Using poor netiquette because you're a new user is one thing, but such blunders as spam and flaming (described below) are another manner.

Spam is the nickname for unsolicited, repetitive e-mail on the Internet; the name is thought to have been derived from a Monty Python sketch from the early '70s. From the sender's point of view, spam is a form of electronic bulk mail, usually sent to individuals or groups identified through newsgroup postings or other e-mail lists.

Very few Internet users like spamming. It's impersonal, it wastes server and download time, and it's not good netiquette. Another way of looking at it would be to compare spamming to an unsolicited telemarketing call. The difference here is that since everybody shares the cost of maintaining the Internet, the user pays a small price for receiving the message.

Flaming is the electronic equivalent of giving someone a public tongue-lashing. Flames are personal attacks, messages that can contain insensitive, derogatory remarks on just about any

aspect of someone's character. Occasionally, a user will receive a flame in the form of an e-mail message, but they are even more prevalent in chat forums and newsgroups, where users can bash each other with relative anonymity.

Flaming occurs for any number of reasons, none of which are either nice or acceptable in most cases. With the dynamics that make up the Internet, people are bound to disagree about issues. Nevertheless, that doesn't make flaming excusable, and it's certainly not good netiquette.

Other Aspects of Netiquette: Acronyms, Smileys, and Signatures

An acronym is a word formed by using the initial letters of a name, or by combining initial letters and parts of a series of words. Everyone is familiar with using acronyms -- IBM, scuba, and CNN, for example. Just as acronyms exist in spoken language, they also have their place on the Internet. Listed below is just a small example of some of the acronyms (and their meanings) you may encounter in a chat room or newsgroup:

WB -- welcome back
JK -- just kidding
BTW -- by the way
LOL -- laughing out loud
IMO -- in my opinion
FYI -- for your information
BRB -- be right back

Smileys are a type of visual shorthand. They're used as a way of conveying personal emotions while sending a text message, and are almost always placed at the end of a sentence, after the punctuation mark.

Just as there are dozens of acronyms in use, there are dozens (perhaps hundreds) of smileys out there. Because smileys are reclining on their side, you'll need to visualize them upright, or tilt your head to the left and look at the screen sideways. On paper, of course, just turning this article to the right until its horizontal allows for easier viewing.

Some of the more popular smileys are:

☺ Happy
:-& Tongue-tied
☺ Winking at you
X-(Out to lunch, brain dead
;-> Sarcastic
:-] Smirking, grinning

Signatures are sort of an electronic postscript to an e-mail message. Most e-mail programs allow users to create a signature file and then attach it at the end of an e-mail message. This is very useful for people who routinely send several e-mails a day. Instead of having to type in the same information over and over, a signature lets you add that information with the click of a button.

Most signature files consist of something like a user's real name and phone/fax numbers; others prefer to add a favorite saying or famous quote. Some e-mail programs allow users to create several signature files, which can drastically cut down on the amount of information they have to type in. Consult your e-mail program and see what your options are regarding signature files. If done right, they can save you a lot of time.

Netiquette Do's and Dont's

There is no accepted rule of thumb for how conversations should be conducted over the Internet. While many people are happy with the idea of complete freedom of expression, it can sometimes lead into an "anything goes" attitude where profanities, slander and outright lies fill the airwaves. With the international differences in class, culture and philosophy and culture, it's difficult to establish a set of universal norms and perceptions. Nevertheless, there are some basic rules that all users interested in good netiquette should follow.

- Don't send messages in ALL CAPITAL LETTERS. This is recognized as the Internet's version of shouting. Although it will get your message noticed, it's also considered rude. When sending e-mail or posting a newsgroup message, use the standard mixture of upper and lower-case letters as if you're writing a business letter. It creates a much better image of the sender.
- Check your messages and posts for proper spelling and punctuation before sending them. You may have the IQ of Einstein, but nobody else knows that on the Internet. If you constantly make spelling errors and use improper grammar and punctuation, you'll be perceived as less intelligent than you actually are.
- Try to avoid sexist language and racially motivated humor. It creates a lot of ill will on chat channels and often lowers the group mentality of those on the same channel with you. Such language doesn't play well with other cultures, either. What you may think is a little joke could be taken as a major offense by someone in another country.
- Think before you send a message. Remember, somebody somewhere is keeping track of all the e-mails you send and receive. A good rule to follow is that you don't send someone anything in an e-mail message that you wouldn't say to that person face-to-face. Just because a personal attack is sent out behind the security of a computer screen doesn't mean it hurts any less.
- If you really feel the need to flame someone and send such a message, be prepared for the consequences. Aside from getting ignored and/or berated by other users or kicked out of a chat forum, it gives you a bad reputation among those on chat forums. Who would want to talk with someone who never has anything good to say? * Some people (like channel operators or sysops) take particular offense at users who repeatedly send flames and have their own ways of dealing with such a situation. More experienced users, for instance, can look you up by your e-mail or IP address. If that happens, don't be surprised if you receive a bunch of nasty flame e-mails in return, or possibly something even worse, such as a homemade computer virus.
- Use common sense and follow the Golden Rule. Don't do or say anything in a chat channel or e-mail message that you wouldn't want done to you. Treat the people you talk to with dignity and respect. Be courteous and polite. Respond in a timely manner. Don't act on emotion. And be a professional.

I hope this article helps clarify some aspects of netiquette. These suggestions should make you a more effective communicator on the Internet and elsewhere.

My next article will begin a two-part series on safeguarding yourself from online scam operations, and how to keep personal information from getting into the hands of others on the Web. As always, we welcome your comments. If you have any questions about netiquette, or any of the other subjects reviewed in this column, please contact me at the number or e-mail address listed below.

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