

You Live Your Life Online. Don't Forget Your Manners

Etiquette helps you get on in life, but having a range of etiquette makes all the difference.

By Victoria Turk

Published Dec. 9, 2019 Updated Dec. 13, 2019

I have made many a digital etiquette faux pas in my time. I used to be that person in the office who always replied to a group email first to show how keen I was, but really I was just coming across as annoying and needy. I spammed my social media with MySpace-angle selfies — camera held aloft, lips pouting like a fish — in my formative online years. I have even ghosted someone.

As more of our lives moves online, good digital etiquette is critical. Just as we judge people by their behavior IRL — in real life — so we take note when a person's manners in the digital sphere leave something to be desired.

Studies have tried to quantify how long it takes to make a first impression, with some suggesting it could be mere milliseconds. Rupert Wesson, academy director at etiquette authority Debrett's, cites seven seconds as the time it takes us to make a judgment about a person after meeting them — and says the same is true for online encounters.

“We unquestionably do that in a digital context,” Mr. Wesson said. “If the medium is only words on a screen, we’re still making judgments.”

Your close friends and family might forgive the odd fumbled Facebook post or unanswered text message, but failure to exhibit good digital etiquette could result in negative outcomes or lost opportunities, whether that’s a romantic interest swiping left instead of right on Tinder, or a prospective employer passing you over because of a poorly worded email or ill-judged tweet. While recruiters might like to pretend they don’t notice such things, Mr. Wesson said it is inevitable.

“When you’ve got 200 applicants, you’re going to pick the one whose tone sounds most like the tone you use, or the tone you unconsciously think most matches the organization they’re joining,” he said.

In this sense, a basic grasp of digital etiquette is an essential aspect of modern “soft skills,” the communication and social skills that are frequently touted as a necessity for success in the workplace and are just as important in our personal lives, too. As with other “soft” qualities, however, digital etiquette is rarely taught; there’s an expectation that we should all just somehow know the rules. Further, there is no real consensus on what actually constitutes “good” digital manners, and even if there were, that consensus would be constantly shifting as technology advances and social mores evolve.

It’s a wonder we manage to digitally communicate at all, so if you’re feeling overwhelmed, here are some starting points.

Learn the lingo

Digital communication is usually text-based, meaning that your manners and etiquette often rely solely on your writing skills. Both the content of your message and its tone will live or die based on what you type on your keyboard, so the gap between, say, landing a joke and causing mortal offense can be perilously fine.

However, we've adapted plenty of creative ways to help make sure our intentions are correctly interpreted. These include new formats, like emoji, but also new usages of old language tools. Gretchen McCulloch, a linguist and author of "Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language," highlights the use of punctuation to convey tone of voice, rather than for grammatical effect, as one such evolution.

"Anything that's not necessary has the potential to take on additional connotations," she said.

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Take the humble period. In digital messaging, a period is no longer required to show that the message is over; a sent message is presumed to be complete. Instead, a period can add a sense of finality or even passive-aggression — although this depends on the context. Ms. McCulloch draws a parallel to spoken language: A period at the end of a sentence would usually suggest a lowering intonation. When used in a sincere context — as in, "That's terrible." — this reinforces the seriousness of the message. But when used after a short, positive phrase — "That's great." — the tone of voice implied by the period can add a sense of sarcasm.

When something as simple as a period can have two almost diametrically opposed meanings, how can you be sure you're on the same page? Ms. McCulloch suggests being upfront and requesting or offering clarifications when needed. If you're not sure your attempt at humor has gone over, for instance, you could follow up with a message to the effect of, "Just joking!"

"It does seem a little bit awkward, but I think it's better than going through life assuming that everyone's mad at you," she said.

Read the room

As in the real world, a lot of digital etiquette is highly context-dependent; you wouldn't behave the same way when sending an email to your manager as you would when texting your best friend. As well as choosing the right level of formality for the situation, you should be prepared to adapt according to the culture and background of the person you are speaking with and the medium through which you are communicating.

"Etiquette helps you get on in life, but actually the most successful people are the ones who have the greatest *range* of etiquette," Mr. Wesson said.

He suggests to always start with a higher level of formality and work your way down. From there, you should look at what other people are doing and try to reflect their behavior back.

"It's exactly the same as going out for a business lunch in a country you're unfamiliar with," Mr. Wesson said. "You keep your eyes and ears open." In an email chain, this could mean starting with a formal means of address, such as "Dear Mr. Wesson," but then switching to "Hi Rupert" if the conversation becomes more familiar.

“One of the principles of being polite with language is that the more effort it takes you to do something, the more polite it’s often considered,” Ms McCulloch said. Instead of asking someone, “Could you close the window?” you might ask, “Would you mind possibly closing the window?” The meaning is the same, but the second option shows a degree of extra effort in an attempt to be more considerate.

There are occasions, however, when the “politest” option may not actually be the most appropriate. If you have a close relationship with someone, switching to a more formal register can introduce a note of distance. Using complex sentences with impeccable grammar in a group chat with your friends is likely to come across as rather aloof.

“Sometimes the politest form may not actually be the one that signals the right thing about your relationship,” Ms. McCulloch said.

Stay human

There are plenty of specific digital etiquette pointers to live by: don’t reply-all to an all-office email; always get consent before sending an intimate photo; never leave a voicemail (a text message shows much more respect for the other person’s time). But in general, it’s hard to formalize exactly what the rules are.

“It’s like nailing jelly to a wall,” Mr. Wesson said. “It keeps moving, and it keeps developing.”

Etiquette in the digital world can shift particularly quickly as new technologies and platforms call for the development of new standards. The widespread adoption of the smartphone, for instance, completely upturned our expectations around email; as soon as we all gained the ability to check email on the go, we

began to expect people to respond much more quickly than before. Though even that expectation already may be passé as concerns around unplugging and embracing our down time take root.

Even where the technology stays the same, social and cultural norms can rapidly shift. To be fair to my former self, it used to be quite accepted — expected, even — that you would upload whole albums full of photos to Facebook and tag everyone in them. Now, the rise of Instagram has correlated with a more curated approach to online photo-sharing, and people are generally more aware of privacy and security concerns. Language, too, quickly evolves: when I, a Millennial, recently said “lol” in spoken conversation, my Gen Z colleague literally laughed out loud.

The most important thing, according to Mr. Wesson, is to stay human, and to keep in mind the guiding principles of all etiquette: care and consideration for other people. He said that Debrett's doesn't believe in etiquette *rules*, but etiquette guidelines. Once you know the basics, you should remain flexible.

“I think the danger is, if you over-codify it,” he said, “then you risk becoming too bland and perhaps inhuman.”

Victoria Turk is the author of “Kill Reply All: A Modern Guide to Online Etiquette, from Social Media to Work to Love.”

A version of this article appears in print on , Section B, Page 6 of the New York edition with the headline: How to Ensure A Good Impression