Netiquette for Your Backyard, Boardroom & Beyond

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With all of the options the Internet has given us, more than 88% of Internet users are currently emailing family, friends and co-workers. With so many people using email as an inexpensive and quick way to communicate, we are all doing what is the most convenient and comfortable for ourselves. The nature of electronic communication can easily lead to misunderstandings, unanswered questions and frustrations. To ease the level of angst we experience, network etiquette or "netiquette" has become a relevant topic and source of conversations. Netiquette as a concept and its application remain in a state of flux, and vary from online community to online community.

Wikipedia defines netiquette as a set of social conventions that facilitate interaction over networks, ranging from Usenet and mailing lists to blogs and forums. We all want to do our part to reduce the size of useless information in people's inboxes, and this article attempts to do so. There are three main sections to help you brush up on your email etiquette so that you don't become the person people cringe about when they see your name appear in their inbox.

NETIQUETTE OF SENDING

BE BRIEF — In this day and age when the average person is receiving more and more email, brevity is critical! Long emails require considerable time to read and glean. When you receive more than one, you most likely don't read the entire message, and if you do, you don't always get the intent of the message because of its length. One helpful guide is to make sure your message is never larger than your own screen, and don't require people to scroll down several times to get to the meat of your message.

USE DESCRIPTIVE SUBJECT LINES — The subject line is oftentimes a neglected aspect of electronic communication. For people who receive many emails, the subject line can be the difference between someone opening your message or not. Rather than using something along the lines of "hey" or "meeting", be much more descriptive and use subjects such as "lunch today" or "Ficus Tree."

STAY ON TOPIC — Make a concerted effort to stay on topic when replying to a message. When someone sends a notice to the group asking about the format of a newsletter, it's inappropriate to bring up other topics that may not relate to the entire group or to the goal of the original message. Rather than everyone focusing on the task at hand, the off-tracked nature of the conversation can waste valuable time and energy.

PEOPLE AREN'T THEIR ORGANIZATIONS — Many people send and receive email from work email accounts because that's the one they check the most frequently, or because they don't have a personal account. Always check with your company's Internet policies to see what is appropriate and allowed before using work resources for personal use. If you are someone who uses your work email for personal use where appropriate, remember that while you may not be speaking for your employer, what you write reflects on them as a user of their email system, so keep it especially professional and of the highest integrity.

BE PATIENT WITH REPLIES — The Internet has certainly taught us to be able to send and receive information instantaneously, but it doesn't mean that everyone sits in front of their computer all day waiting to reply to your messages. Be patient when sending someone a message as we all live in different time zones and have different priorities throughout the day.

BE PROFESSIONAL — If you are new to the workforce or in search of a grant to increase your funding, make sure you are using a professional email address—which could mean changing or getting a new account. If your email address is SuperSexy4u@yahoo.com, the likelihood of your future employer or granting agency to hand over money or opportunities could be jeopardized because of the lack of professionalism.

BE CAREFUL SENDING ATTACHMENTS — Unlike a typical email message that is relatively small in size, an attachment can be considerably larger and require more time and space on your network. Avoid sending attachments to mailing lists, rather send a message inviting people to find the document on a separate link or to email you directly if they want a copy. Attachments can take up a great deal of space and take quite a while to open on handheld devices such as the Blackberry, iPhone or Palm, so be careful about sending too many attachments.

COPY THE MINIMUM NUMBER OF PEOPLE – While it's fairly easy to add people's names to your recipient list, take the time to consider who needs the information. In addition to the annoyance it creates to include people with no significance on the message, it also requires more bandwidth on your behalf. When you receive a message with several people copied, it's not always necessary to continue replying to the entire group. When messages don't involve the entire group, take the time to edit your list so that you're not contributing to the huge influx of Internet traffic.

EMOTICONS AND ABBREVIATIONS – True, the smiley faces are cute and personalized, but they aren't appropriate for general email. They are best left to instant messages and personal emails to friends and family. Similarly, use abbreviations sparingly. Feel free to use organizational or commonly used abbreviations such as FYI and FAQ, but avoid trendy abbreviations designed for texting such as AAR and TTYL (at any rate or talk to you later).

> ### Use Abbreviations Sparingly
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> OMG I totally forgot about our meeting today. My bad ☹

BE UNEMOTIONAL – As wonderful as the Internet has become, perhaps the worst aspect would have to be the lack of emotion in electronic communication. When you are with a group of people, it's easy to portray your attitude and ideas based on body language, facial expression, tone and pitch of your voice. When it comes to the Internet, you have little to communicate what the intent of a phrase is. When reading a message, it's difficult to tell if the person is upset, making a joke or were completely serious. All you have are words on a screen. Whether you're discussing an important issue or trying to decide where to have your next association meeting, it's easy to misinterpret the senders meaning to the message. Humor and sarcasm have a tendency to reflect as rude and condescending. Armed with this knowledge, avoid overreacting to email messages you may receive that seem insulting or hurtful as the intent isn't always what came through when reading it. Pay special attention when you are disagreeing with someone. Always make sure to acknowledge the positive aspects of their argument or idea and in a professional and respectful manner, describe your position so as to not hurt feelings, but rather continue the discussion.

PAINT A PRETTY PICTURE OF YOURSELF – With huge corporations and information networks all over the country, we don't always work face to face with people, and often times, the only way we know each other is via email. Being aware of this, make yourself look as positive as possible. Don't use capitals unnecessarily in email—it translates to shouting and is considered rude. If you want to emphasize a word or point, capitalize, bold or underline only the word you're trying to emphasize. If you have a lengthy message where you are stressing two or three ideas, utilize the number or bullet feature to convey the message more clearly. Similarly, don't write in all lower case as it translates to mumbling. The basic rule of thumb is to remember your grammar and type how you would normally write.

> ### Don't Use Capitals Unnecessarily
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> I KNOW I SAID I WOULD BE THERE BUT I WAS BUSY!!

NETIQUETTE OF REPLYING

REPLYING AND FORWARDING –Always reply to the sender. When someone sends an invitation to be involved in a workgroup or neighborhood watch, it's only necessary to reply to the original sender rather than replying to the entire group who received the invitation. It's generally of little interest to the rest of the group why someone can't take on another project or doesn't want to be involved.

MINIMIZE FORWARDING – When you receive a message that needs to be sent on to a group of people, make sure you've carefully looked at the recipient list so you aren't forwarding a message to someone who was included in the original. However, if you receive a message where the recipient list is suppressed, it's always better to be safe than sorry, so include the people who you know should receive the information.

INCLUDE SUBSEQUENT COMMUNICATIONS – Include a portion of the original message that you are replying to so readers know what you're referring to. It's not necessary to include 12 messages worth of communications as more information than necessary is going back and forth and people end up getting long, meaningless messages.

ACKNOWLEDGE THE COMMUNICATOR – If someone sends you an important email, the polite thing to do is to reply! Even if you can't answer their questions or get to the intent of the message right away, reply to acknowledge that you in fact received their communication. If you're being included in an office or neighborhood association meeting and you know there is no chance that you'll be attending, reply immediately to let them know you can't make it, but that you appreciate being included. There's rarely a good excuse for ignoring co-workers emails, especially when work is providing a computer and Internet connection.

RESIST THE FLAME – "Flaming" is what occurs when people express a strongly held opinion or idea without holding back. It's the type of message where you don't have to wonder what the person means or how they really feel—it's out in the open for the world to see and react to! Flaming can be fun to read and write, and oftentimes, it's well deserved. However, it takes a great deal of bandwidth and gets old very fast for those that aren't involved but have to sort through it to get to the intent of the site. It gets the group off track and ruins the momentum. If your group is discussing how much to water newly planted citrus, ranting and raving about your monthly water bills doesn't help matters!

> ### Resist Flaming
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> It doesn't matter to me what kind of cookies we have—I'm sick and tired of our grocery store. They never have parking, it's always jammed packed with slow people and the prices keep going up. Anyone else annoyed by this?

AVOID CHAIN LETTERS – If you are unfortunate enough to be the recipient of a chain letter, do the online community a favor and simply delete the message. Not only are they a waste of time and energy, but they are illegal in many countries.

TEACH DON'T PREACH – At some point, everyone was new to the Internet, so if someone makes a mistake, either grammatical or by asking a seemingly stupid question that's already clearly been answered, be nice about pointing it out. If it's a spelling error and it isn't of a critical nature, don't bring it to their attention. Most likely, they've noticed their own mistake and are embarrassed enough about it. If it's a mistake that reflects on the entire group or is so important that you decide to inform the sender, be sure to do it politely and privately. It's not necessary to reply to the entire group that the sender didn't spell something correctly. Always give people the benefit of the doubt!

NETIQUETTE OF CONFIDENTIALITY

DON'T PUBLICIZE OTHER'S EMAIL ADDRESSES — Most people receive messages that raise the question how did the author find our email address, so we can all appreciate this particular rule. It is considered unprofessional and rude to distribute other people's email addresses via email or posting messages to persons unassociated with the communicating parties.

DON'T SEND WHAT YOU DON'T READ — It's inappropriate to forward an email you haven't read, or send someone an attachment you haven't opened. It can prove to be an embarrassing incident if the email or attachment contained inaccurate or unprofessional information.

REMEMBER ARCHIVING — It's important to remember that mailing lists, listserves, and groups have systems that archive information. If you don't want your words and messages archived and brought back at a later time, then don't press send. This can be even more important if your message is of a confidential nature that shouldn't be discussed electronically or if it involves other people.

RESPECT COPYRIGHT — It has become quite easy to find information on the Internet, put it in an email message and send it, giving the reader the impression that they are your words. Whether it was the sender's intent to take credit for the idea or not, it's hard to tell because of the emotionless atmosphere of the Internet. Always give credit where credit is due. Also, if you are forwarding someone else's work, don't change or edit their words, grammar or structure, even if you think you are correcting their typos and/or mistakes.

The Internet has created an easy and affordable way for people to communicate. With budget and geographic issues, the Internet will continue to become a critical aspect in our private and professional lives. By following these simple rules of thumb, you will quickly become one of those people your family, friends and co-workers appreciate communicating with.

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A Rattlesnake Medley

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RATTLESNAKES — Misunderstanding, hatred, and fear have followed them through history like a bad credit rating. "I saw a rattlesnake 6 foot long, it was as thick as my arm." "Baby rattlesnakes are the most dangerous because they can't control their venom." "I was chased by a rattlesnake." "Mohave rattlesnakes are the mean ones." "Rattlesnakes travel in pairs." "Rattlesnakes are more toxic when they first emerge from hibernation because they haven't used their venom for a long time."

In the western movies, no one survives the bite of a rattlesnake and an agonizing death comes within minutes, if not seconds. The epic proportions of this list of misnomers is only eclipsed by the exaggerations themselves. As often is the case in biology, the truth is a tad less sensational, but no less amazing. Let's start with the facts.

Arizona is the rattlesnake capitol of the United States. Currently 12 of the 16 recognized species of rattlesnakes found in the United States are found in Arizona, meaning about 1/3 of the known species of rattlesnakes are found in Arizona. One of these species of rattlesnakes is found only in Arizona within the United States and some mountain ranges in the state may harbor as many as eight species of rattlesnakes. Because many different species of rattlers may live in relatively close proximity to each other, they must partition the resources to avoid undue competition. If all the species of rattlesnakes did the same thing, the habitat could not support the numbers or variety of rattlers that it does. This makes rattlesnakes excellent examples of habitat partitioning or niche filling. For example, some species of rattlesnakes prefer rocky desert slopes while another may inhabit canyons in mesic woodlands, and yet another thrives in dry desert flats or dunes. Other species are dietary and habitat generalists and are found in a variety of different habitat types.

All rattlesnakes give live birth. Young of most species are born from late July to August. A few give birth in September and October. All young are born "fully loaded" meaning they are capable of delivering a prey-killing bite from birth. The venom of the young of at least some species of rattlesnake is more potent than the adults of the same species on a drop for drop basis. This gives young rattlesnakes an advantage in acquiring those first few precious meals. This does not mean that young rattlesnakes are more dangerous than the adults of the same species. Young rattlesnakes produce far less venom than their adult counter parts making them less a threat to humans. The young of at least some species stay with their parent for a week or so after birth. No information or experience is passed on from the adult to the young. Rattlesnakes are born with all the information they need to survive. They are "hardwired" for survival.