Online Etiquette
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The Ins and Outs of Netiquette

Many of us use the Internet for both business and pleasure to exchange email, to discuss topics in newsgroups or live chat using online services, such as America Online. Have you ever had a bad experience using the Internet?

For example, you regularly participate in an Internet newsgroup related to your business or hobbies. Normally, you read all the postings hoping to learn something new. Maybe you feel you haven't been contributing to the group, so the next time you read the messages, you reply to a question posted by another member. In return, you receive a scathing reply from a third group member questioning your intelligence. You have been "flamed."

You question your own knowledge, and whether you have correctly adhered to protocol used by newsgroups. The sad answer is your posting was probably within protocol, and the opinion you expressed was reasonable. Unfortunately, poor etiquette is used everyday on the Internet by individuals who would not use the same manners in other forms of communication like the telephone or face to face. Poor etiquette has developed in recent years among those who consider the Internet their private domain, and fail to recognize the messages they post are a strong reflection on themselves.

How to behave on the Internet

Putting Your Best Foot Forward
What constitutes good etiquette (commonly referred to as "netiquette")
on the Internet? Most of us access the Internet through commercial Internet
providers or national and local online services. There are some rules in
dealing with these services that are good habits to follow:

-When first logging on to a service, you may be allowed to pick your
online name. Some people pick silly pseudonyms, but you may want to stick
with an easily recognizable name, such as your first initial and last name.
Remember that the name you pick will result in others' first impressions
of you.

-When signing on to a service and filling out personal information,
use abbreviations carefully. While it may be obvious to you that Den refers
to Denver, it probably isn't to others around the world.

-If your service has a time limit, please observe it. Some online
services have limited facilities, and others may be trying to dial in.

-Don't blame system operators for problems. If you're having connection
problems, there are many parts of the connection which could be at fault,
including phone lines and your own computer. If you think the problem may
be with the service, ask questions without placing blame.

-When logging off a service, be sure to use the correct log off command
before hanging up your phone. Not logging off correctly can cause problems
for your service operators.

Follow These "Rules"

Proper netiquette should always be observed when communicating with
others on the 'net, and this communication comes in three primary forms.
Email is the most commonly used function of the Internet, allowing you
to exchange messages with any other person who has an email address. Newsgroups
provide for the exchange of questions and ideas in the form of postings
or messages on a specific topic read at a later time by anyone who signs
up for that newsgroup. The third form of communication is live chat groups
available to members of online services, allowing you to exchange "real
time" messages with other members concerning assigned topics or general
conversation.

There are several tips that can apply to all three forms of Internet
communication:

-Keep it short. Most people connect with the Internet via modems
that have limited "bandwidth." Your recipients will appreciate concise
messages.

-Be complete. While the first rule is brevity, the second insures
that people will know what you are talking about. Don't assume they will
remember conversations from several days ago, and use abbreviations judiciously.

-Avoid control characters and special characters. Many computers,
especially Macintosh, will produce special characters when key presses
are combined with the control or command keys, and the option or alt keys.
These are not handled well over the Internet -- avoid them.

-Don't shout. Typing in all capital characters is equivalent on the
Internet to shouting. If you want to emphasize specific words, surround
them with *asterisks* or _underlines _.

-Don't criticize people. Everyone makes mistakes, you can graciously

ignore spelling errors and other simple errors. Machines make mistakes
too, so if you don't receive messages you are expecting, assume they have
been lost or garbled in transmission. Politely ask the sender for clarification.

Newsgroups and email are similar to written correspondence and additional
rules of netiquette are appropriate. All online correspondence should contain
appropriate salutations, not content alone. Take the time to read your
own words before transmitting, and you'll catch most spelling or grammatical
errors. It is sometimes appropriate to summarize previous messages, especially
questions being answered in newsgroups, but be sure to summarize. Be selective
about the lines that are repeated in your message. Avoid lengthy "signatures."
Signatures are those lines of text automatically added to your messages
by software. I've seen signatures containing complete pictures drawn in
ASCII characters. Be respectful of other people's bandwidth and use brief
signatures.

Newsgroups are gatherings of people interested in the same subject.
Individual newsgroups may have specific rules, but there are still general
rules of netiquette that apply:

-Join the group for a couple of weeks before asking questions. This
will give you the chance to get to know the group and find out what questions
have been recently asked.

-Use short, descriptive titles for postings. When posting a question,
don't use "question" as your subject line.

-Be specific and succinct in content.

-Only post a message once. It is tempting to post the same question
to several newsgroups with similar subjects, but many of the same people
will be reading those newsgroups. Multiple postings will decrease the likelihood
of receiving an answer.

-When posting an answer or reply, summarize in a few words the original
question or comment.

-When answering a question in a busy newsgroup, send the answer to
the inquirer via email. Ask that individual to post a summary of answers
to the newsgroup.

Email is commonly used for business today. The same business salutations
used in written letters are acceptable and necessary in email. When appropriate,
indicate if a reply is necessary. If you begin using email as part of your
standard business activities, be sure to answer your email every day. Remain
sensitive to companies you are dealing with. Like those that do not care
to receive business transactions via FAX, there are those who use their

email accounts only for less formal business needs.

Why Me?
These rules of etiquette used on the Internet are based on common sense, so you have probably been following them to the best of your ability. But what should you do when someone displays poor netiquette towards you? Perhaps you signed onto an online service and receive a message from another user who wants to engage in some online conversation. Before you can reply, your modem connection fails, and you sign on again. You then receive a "flame" from the other user because you ignored the first message. Obviously, the other user did not consider that you may not have had the opportunity to reply, or that you may not have received the first message.

Don't fan the flames by replying in an angry manner. It's best to send a short message explaining the problem you had. You might add a simple "No thank you" to the request for conversation. If the other person has been particularly abusive or persists in sending undesired messages, simply report the incident to the system operators.

This strategy also works well in newsgroups in which one of the members has become abusive of others for their views and opinions. I have witnessed groups in which the offending member was totally ignored, and the abuse subsided. Moderated newsgroups, those without ".alt" at the beginning of their name will have moderators who should be made aware of any problems.

Women can face additional problems on the Internet when their online name indicates their gender. It is not uncommon for women to receive advances from men through email or in chat rooms. Few of these men are persistent or abusive. The best strategy is to ignore the advances or to send politely worded replies turning down the requests for continued attention.

Have Fun
Observing proper netiquette doesn't mean you cannot use some abbreviations or have fun in your messages. Common abbreviations you'll see on the Internet include BTW (by the way) and FAQ which refers to a list of Frequently Asked Questions. Other examples are OTOH (on the other hand), IMHO (in my humble opinion) and CUL8er (see you later).

Informal messages may also contain "smileys" or little caricatures, usually faces created from common keyboard characters. The standard way to view smileys is to tilt your head to the left. An example is the original smiley :-) , or the smiley with a wink ;-) or a frown :-(. You can even create one for an American President. =|:-)= is Abe Lincoln! Occasionally spicing up informal messages with a smiley or two add to your fun or let someone know a comment is meant to be light or even sarcastic.

Whenever faced with a question of netiquette, common sense will guide you with a few, simple ideas:

-Do as you would in RL (real life).

-The other person is human; people should be forgiven for their mistakes.
Don't start any "flame wars."

-There are many connections between you and another person, and machines
will make mistakes too.

-Respect other people's time by communicating clearly and succinctly.

-Respect other people's privacy.

-Share your knowledge and respect others' knowledge.

-Remember you are representing yourself or your business online,
and so "look" your best.

Abiding by these rules of netiquette will result in better communication
for everyone involved.