A Cry for Miss Manners: Lessons in Virtual Etiquette

Did you know that scholars today estimate that 99.99% of all information that humankind generates is produced in a non-paper (electronic) form? How about that every year, we generate enough electronic information to fill the entire Library of Congress…2.5 million times? Perhaps you did know, because you're one of those people with the latest Macintosh laptop that fits in an envelope, can type 150 words a minute on your PDA, and knows what "AFAIK NSFW" means ("as far as I know, it's not safe for work"). Perhaps you're even reading this article online, and thinking how outdated and archaic the author seems to be.

Regardless of how fully you embrace today's technology and the wonderful convenience it brings to our lives, we should all recognize that the ability to use a five minute email, or even a 10 second text message, to convey what used to take an hour to write in the form of a letter, isn't all it's cracked up to be. Yes, it is amazing and wonderfully convenient, and no, this isn't an argument to turn back the clock. However, especially in the business world, this type of capability has an enormous, often overlooked disadvantage: not having time to do things the "old way" often means, in reality, not giving proper consideration to the things we communicate.

Fundamentally, the problem is that writing a letter, or putting any formal communication down in print, seems exactly that: formal. Before sending out such correspondence, the norm is often to prepare and revise drafts, have proofreaders, and generally reflect on what we've said or should have said before memorializing it. We intuitively recognize that paper correspondence is often saved, stored, and lasting.

In contrast, we generally treat e-mail, instant messaging, and other electronic communications as conversational, which gives rise to a dangerous trap as these more frequently become the medium of choice for business correspondence. They are so rapid-fire that we frequently treat them more as verbal exchanges and private "chats," even when corresponding with third parties regarding business matters.

Of course, the real difference between electronic and verbal exchanges is that what is printed, even on a screen, is preserved. Ironically, while treated like a conversation, electronic correspondence is actually more permanent than paper. It can be recovered, even after being deleted, and proliferates far more easily than a paper in a copier. Did you know that a single e-mail that you send around the office becomes an average of 1,000 copies in various nooks and crannies before it ever leaves the business?

Therefore, it can be reviewed, evaluated, and criticized by those we never intended (though we should have) to read them. In short, it can come back to bite us in most embarrassing fashion. Many of us are familiar with the horror stories, either first-hand or passed along like an e-mail chain message: a lady sends an e-mail to her boyfriend – the wrong one – or some poor sap in the course of criticizing a new workplace policy with a colleague mentions the utter density of his boss – only he does so accidentally hitting the "reply to all" button.

At best, this an embarrassment and rueful experience that just might be juicy or humorous enough to take its rightful place in the lore of e-mail gaffes. At worst, you're next e-mail message is one seeking new employment. Lawyers especially know: the "smoking gun" is usually in the e-mails (See Enron, and Texaco v. Pennzoil). Complicating matters further is that familiarity breeds contempt. In other words, the more and more one uses e-mail and instant

electronic communications, the more likely one is to be careless, thoughtless, and ultimately, run into trouble.

Accordingly, we would all do well to remember and employ the following simple e-mail rules and safeguards to prevent these embarrassments from infecting our workplace routines. Rule #1: Always verify each address in the "To" field before you send an e-mail. Rule #2: Never forget Rule #1. Rule #3: use your spell check with workplace e-mails because professionalism matters and your recipient may have cause to revisit your (poorly drafted) message on multiple occasions. Rule #4: Take steps to keep your personal and business e-mail addresses and correspondence separate. Mixing these ultimately leads to regret. Finally, remember this Golden Rule of electronic correspondence: We must each treat every message as one that will be preserved for all of time, and recoverable by strangers with nefarious intent, because that really is the case.