Tech Etiquette is Just Common Sense
By Mark Simpson

Abstract
Advancements in communications and online technologies are so rapid that social conventions in their appropriate use have not always had time to develop before problems have arisen. Simple common sense though can tell you how, when, and where it is appropriate and safe to do so. Four common sense best practices are discussed.

The Need for Tech Etiquette

You see it every day in one form or another. Business professionals who appear to be talking to themselves in the middle of a crowded room; the car driver talking on a cell phone while attempting to turn a corner; people walking across a busy street with their heads down, rapidly pushing keys on a smartphone. We have become addicted to technology and the instant gratification that comes with being able to connect to anyone, anywhere, at any time. E-mail, cell phones, social networking, texting, blogging and more, allow us to connect with others in ways we never dreamed of just a few short years ago. We are no longer tethered to a landline telephone or Internet connection at home or work to communicate with family and friends. Now we can call anyone from virtually any location, send them a text message, and connect wirelessly to the World Wide Web to post a blog or send an e-mail. Unfortunately common sense in the use of these technologies hasn't kept pace with the advancements.

Just because we can use technology to connect with others any time from any place doesn't mean that we should. In the United States, for example, state legislation banning or limiting the use of cell phones while driving is becoming more and more commonplace (GHSA 2009a) as the number of accidents increase (GHSA 2009b). The number of fatal accidents caused by text messaging (also known as "texting") while driving (Box 2009) is also resulting in legislation to outlaw or restrict such practices (Schulte 2008). Dangers and accidents aside, casual observation suggests that technology impacts the way in which we interact with each other face-to-face. No longer does the person in your presence get your attention. Instead, the ringing cell phone or the alert

tone of an arriving text message brings a conversation to a halt as focus shifts to the incoming message.

To be fair, the advancement of communications and online technologies is so rapid that the social conventions in their appropriate or inappropriate use have not always had time to develop before problems have arisen. For example, the perceived feelings of security in being able to reach someone by cell phone at any time hasn't always taken into account the context of the person receiving the call. A person may be in a meeting or public gathering and not able to carry-on a conversation, but the cell phone invites (even demands) that the alternate conversation occurs. And nothing is more disturbing than a cell phone conversation in a public restroom! We now can communicate with more people more frequently, but sometimes we are doing so in ways that are unsafe or rude to others.

Tech etiquette (sometimes called "netiquette" or "techniquette") does not have to be a series of complicated rules and regulations though. Simple common sense can tell you how, when, and where it is appropriate to use a cell phone or smartphone, what to say or not say in a text message, or what to post or not post on a social network. And because technology changes so rapidly, common sense will more readily help you determine what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior as opposed to waiting for new best practices. The problem then is what should common sense be telling us?

Four Common Sense Best Practices with Technology

I believe there are four common sense best practices in the use of communications and online technologies that can guide us as we use them. These four best practices can be categorized as safety, security, privacy, and courtesy.

Safety

First and perhaps foremost, a common sense best practice with technology should be *safety.* Using one hand to hold a cell phone while driving a moving vehicle is not a safe practice. Not only can the conversation distract you from being alert to what is happening on the road around you, but losing the use of one hand to drive the vehicle can be dangerous. Your reaction times while holding a cell phone or smartphone are diminished, making defensive driving more difficult. All it takes is a second for you to

lose control of a moving vehicle if you do not have both hands on the steering wheel. And while hands-free microphones make it possible to use a cell phone while driving, the question of being distracted still remains a possibility, especially when trying to place or answer a call (Box 2009).

Text messaging while driving is also extremely dangerous, as you must use both hands to type the text and hold the device. And not only the hands are distracted while texting—the driver must also look at the screen from time to time to see if what he or she has typed appears correctly. Perhaps you have seen a driver who is looking down at their lap while zooming along the road, often weaving unsteadily in the lane. Chances are good they are reading something, perhaps a text message, or they are texting someone. Sending or receiving text messages while driving is not a safe practice (13 Central Florida News 2009).

Safety also comes into play when using some technologies around the gasoline pump. Many people do not realize or heed the warnings posted at most gas stations to not use cell phones when filling the gas tank. There is always the possibility of the device malfunctioning, causing an electric spark and subsequently an explosion of the gas fumes.

Whatever the context or the technology, common sense suggests that you ask yourself if using the technology is safe to do at the moment, whether your physical mobility or mental acuity is impaired or distracted by doing so, and if the surrounding environment is safe or unsafe with its proper use.

Security

Security is another common sense best practice with technology. It is not wise to be giving out credit card information over a cell phone in a crowded room or bus where anyone can hear what you are saying. Neither is entering personal information on a computer using free unsecured Wi-Fi at a local café or airport to login into a personal bank account or access e-mail. It is not uncommon for hackers to gather personal information from unsuspecting users of sites with unprotected access.

Whatever the context or the technology, it is always wise to ask yourself if your use of the technology is secure, or whether someone else may be able to gain unauthorized access to the information you are communicating electronically. Given the

increasing problem of identity theft in the United States alone (ITRC 2009), users of smartphones connecting to the Internet should be concerned about the security of the information they are sending and receiving. Web surfing can be fun while relaxing by the pool—but avoid sending private information over a possibly unsecure network. The same is true when using public computers in schools or libraries. They may or may not have secure access to the Internet, nor appropriate security software to prevent hackers or other users from accessing personal information you may enter on the computer.

Common sense suggests that you ask yourself if the technology you are using has appropriate security protocols in place to protect the information you are communicating, and if the environment you are in while using the technology is secure for its use.

Privacy

Privacy is a third common sense best practice with technology. The old adage "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas" does not necessarily apply to what you say on your cell phone or post online. It is amazing the cell phone conversations one hears in public. The person talking on the cell phone often seems to assume that no one else can hear the conversation, even when they are shouting to be heard above the ambient noise of the surrounding environment. Thus information is sometimes shared over the cell phone that is inflammatory about others—meant to be shared privately—but heard by all present. Similarly, social networking sites thrive on the capability of people sharing personal information with one another. And some people do—to extremes. Pictures from wild parties, negative opinions about employers, disparaging comments about groups or individuals, proprietary information about the workplace, all get posted on sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, etc. every day. What is often forgotten is that once the information is posted, it's always there or it could turn up again someday (Barnes 2006) even if deleted. What we forget is that posting information about yourself or others on a social networking site isn't necessarily just viewed by family or friends. Employers are also increasingly turning to social networking sites to learn more about the activities of potential employees, with as many as 1/3 of job applicants being rejected for what was found on the sites (Havenstein 2008).

Technology also allows one to text message breaking information during a meeting so that it appears immediately on a blog or Twitter networking site for others to

read. When such information is posted though, participants in the meeting may feel their comments are no longer private, hindering open and honest debate and discussion. No matter how good or positive the information may be, posting information about a meeting without prior approval of the participants can be an invasion of privacy of those involved. It also can result in communicating proprietary information and violating corporate privacy if, in our exuberance to quickly share good news, we accidentally share too many details.

Privacy also cannot be taken for granted in online environments—you should never post something online you would regret someone seeing or reading at a later date, even if years later. And you cannot rule out the possibility of the legal ramifications if what you post about someone or some organization becomes wider public knowledge (Thompson 2008).

Common sense suggests that you think about privacy issues regarding yourself and others as a result of what you are saying in a public environment, or what you are writing and uploading to an online venue.

Courtesy

Courtesy is a fourth common sense best practice with technology. As with using common sense in matters of security and privacy, what we say with technology, how we say it, and when and where we say it matters in terms of being polite and courteous to others. Rather than communicate something face-to-face, we now can send an e-mail or type a message and forward it to a person's cell phone or smartphone. That can be great for sharing important information quickly with another person. But communicating negative information through an e-mail or text message may not be polite or fair to the person receiving it.

Brevity in communication such as that which works best with e-mail, text messaging, blog postings, and social networking means that we must be more careful how we communicate in writing. Just as TYPING IN ALL CAPS IS CONSIDERED YELLING in electronic environments, brevity in writing can easily come across as cold hearted, demanding, or negative. Emoticons (Sharpened.net 2009) do allow us to make smiley faces to express feelings behind what we are saying, or we can use acronyms and abbreviations like LOL to indicate that we are "laughing out loud" in our message

(NetLingo.com 2009). But the use of emoticons and acronyms can become confusing in a message as they assume the receiver knows the meaning of these forms of shorthand communication. When writing in electronic context, we must be careful to be clear in the precision of what we are saying but not assume the reader knows the meaning of every abbreviation and emoticon that we may create. Courtesy means keeping the content easy for the reader to read and understand.

Courtesy in the use of technology should also take into consideration whether or not your use is distracting or embarrassing to others. Taking a cell phone call during a conversation with another person, making a cell phone call in a restroom, or texting or web surfing while sitting in a meeting or movie theatre is not courteous to others with you or around you. What is annoying is the common practice of answering a cell phone call during a meeting or social gathering rather than silencing the phone before it starts. Given that we have always found ways to distract ourselves (such as doodling on a note pad) in situations in which we might be bored or disinterested, it still is not courteous to others to allow your use of technology to distract them or rudely interrupt them. Reading e-mails and sending text messages while you are supposed to be attentive to a meeting at hand is impolite to those present as well as the presenter.

Common sense suggests that being courteous when using technology is to show respect for those taking the time to be in your presence face-to-face, and being polite to others around you. It comes across as rude and impolite to make someone wait while you respond to technology vying for your attention, or to distract others in your use of a cell phone or smartphone.

Conclusion

Advancements in communications technology, social networking, and the information sharing applications available to us on the Internet will continue to present us with challenges on how, when and where to use them, and in ways that are socially appropriate. But if we use common sense as we deploy these technologies in our lives, we can ensure that we are using them with safety, security, privacy, and courtesy in mind. To do otherwise only diminishes or hurts ourselves, possibly endangers others, and ultimately leads to regulations on the use of the technology. If we do not learn to use common sense in matters of tech etiquette, history teaches us that over time someone else

will set standards for us, usually the government, resulting in regulations and penalties that could prohibit or inhibit our use of technology to share ideas and communicate freely with one another.

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