

Disruptions: Digital Era Redefining Etiquette

By *NICK BILTON*



Byron Smith for The New York Times What was once normal can be seen as uncivilized — like asking someone for directions when such information can easily be found on Google Maps.

Some people are so rude. Really, who sends an e-mail or text message that just says “Thank you”? Who leaves a voice mail message when you don’t answer, rather than texting you? Who asks for a fact easily found on Google?

Don’t these people realize that they’re wasting your time?

Of course, some people might think me the rude one for not appreciating life’s little courtesies. But many social norms just don’t make sense to people drowning in digital communication.

Take the “thank you” message. [Daniel Post Senning](#), a great-great-grandson of Emily Post and a co-author of the 18th edition of “[Emily Post’s Etiquette](#),” asked: “At what point does appreciation and showing appreciation outweigh the cost?”

That said, he added, “it gives the impression that digital natives can’t be bothered to nurture relationships, and there’s balance to be found.”

Then there is voice mail, another impolite way of trying to connect with someone. Think of how long it takes to access your voice mail and listen to one of those long-winded messages. “Hi, this is so-and-so...” In text messages, you don’t have to declare who you are, or even say hello. E-mail, too, leaves something to be desired, with subject lines and “hi” and “bye,” because the communication could happen faster by text. And then there are the worst offenders of all: those who leave a voice mail message and then e-mail to tell you they left a voice mail message.

My father learned this lesson last year after leaving me a dozen voice mail messages, none of which I listened to. Exasperated, he called my sister to complain that I never returned his calls. "Why are you leaving him voice mails?" my sister asked. "No one listens to voice mail anymore. Just text him."

My mother realized this long ago. Now we communicate mostly through Twitter.

[Tom Boellstorff](#), a professor of digital anthropology at the University of California, Irvine, said part of the problem is that offline and online communications borrow from each other. For example, the e-mail term CC stands for carbon copy, as in the carbon paper used to copy a letter. But some gestures, like opening an e-mail with "hello" or signing off with "sincerely," are disappearing from the medium.

This is by no means the first conundrum with a new communication technology. In the late 1870s, when the telephone was invented, [people didn't know how to greet](#) a caller. Often, there was just silence. Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor, suggested that people say "Ahoy!" Others proposed, "What is wanted?" Eventually "Hello" won out, and it hastened its use in face-to-face communications.

Now, with Google and online maps at our fingertips, what was once normal can be seen as uncivilized — like asking someone for directions to a house, restaurant or office, when they can easily be found on Google Maps.

I once asked a friend something easily discovered on the Internet, and he responded with a link to [lmgty.com](#), which stands for Let Me Google That For You.

In the age of the smartphone, there is no reason to ask once-acceptable questions: the weather forecast, a business phone number, a store's hours. But some people still do. And when you answer them, they respond with a thank-you e-mail.

"I have decreasing amounts of tolerance for unnecessary communication because it is a burden and a cost," said Baratunde Thurston, co-founder of [Cultivated Wit](#), a comedic creative company. "It's almost too easy to not think before we express ourselves because expression is so cheap, yet it often costs the receiver more."

Mr. Thurston said he encountered another kind of irksome communication when a friend asked, by text message, about his schedule for the South by Southwest festival. "I don't even know how to respond to that," he said. "The answer would be so long. There's no way I'm going to type out my schedule in a text."

He said people often asked him on social media where to buy his book, rather than simply Googling the question. You're already on a computer, he exclaimed. "You're on the thing that has the answer to the thing you want to know!"

How to handle these differing standards? Easy: think of your audience. Some people, especially older ones, appreciate a thank-you message. Others, like me, want no reply. "It is important to think about who the relationship is with," Mr. Senning said.

The anthropologist Margaret Mead once said that in traditional societies, the young learn from the old. But in modern societies, the old can also learn from the young. Here's hoping that politeness never goes out of fashion, but that time-wasting forms of communication do.

E-mail: bilton@nytimes.com

A version of this article appeared in print on 03/11/2013, on page B1 of the New York edition with the headline: Thanks? Don't Bother.