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Cell phones: Curse or technological privilege?

Several weeks ago, I was picking up my dry cleaning, and noticed a sign on the wall that read, "You will receive the best assistance when not talking on your cell phone." My daughter related to me a sign she saw in one of the Subway restaurants that read: "We ask you to stay off your cell phone while ordering or we will send you to the back of the line." As you might imagine or have experienced, when ordering, customers talking on their cell phones are annoying to both the restaurant staff and to those waiting in line.

Unfortunately, more and more, we see businesses placing signage on walls, counters and tables, as well as asking customers to refrain from using a cell phone while conducting business. Phones are still ringing during job interviews and at meetings, concerts, plays, movie theaters, classrooms, places of worship, funerals, and we could go on and on. Certainly, cell phones are a technological privilege that most of us find useful in our daily activities. We can reach most anyone, anytime, anyplace. Yet, how many times have we "cursed" those individuals who use their phones inappropriately and unsafely?

Regrettably, cell phone rudeness still prevails. So, with more than 250 million cell phone subscribers, now is probably a good time to take a few moments to, once again, reflect on several courses of action for courteous cell phone usage, or as I read in an August 2008 article written by Mobilecommandos, "... how to use your common sense and remain polite in a human society."

1. Be aware of your surroundings.

There are few things more annoying than listening to the intimate details of a stranger's activities at a weekend party, the fight he had with his spouse the night before, or the latest conflict going on at work. Bottom line — avoid conducting nonessential calls in restaurants, checkout lines, elevators, restrooms, airport gates, trains, buses and in other close quarter areas.

2. People take priority. Keep in mind that friends, family, colleagues and clients take priority over a cell call. Having a conversation in their presence can be rude, and make them feel unimportant. The same goes for text messaging, reading and responding to e-mails. In an emergency situation, simply excuse yourself, move to a location that will be more private, handle the call and return. Or, if you are expecting a call of extreme importance, let those you're with know that you will have to excuse yourself for a few moments when the call comes in. Put your phone on vibrate and continue conversing with those in front of you.

3. Choose an appropriate ring tone. Personalized rings seem to be the trend. A ring tone may be humorous the first time it sounds; after three rings it generally becomes annoying. As a business professional, it's a good idea to consider what the ring tone says about you and the environment in which it rings. Perhaps a low basic ring may be the one to choose over a loud, annoying melody. To many, the mere fact that the phone is ringing is bad enough without the ring also playing a tune. Certainly, an option is to put your phone on vibrate.

4. Consider your voice tone. It has always been interesting to me how people feel the need to talk louder while speaking on a cell phone. Keep in mind, though, that talking loudly does not improve the call reception. So, avoid loud, animated conversations. Keep your voice low, at a con-

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versational level. When in a public area, move to a private location to continue the call.

With the explosion of cell phone and PDA usage in our society and the new ways to use them, many individuals are becoming increasingly confused about setting boundaries as to what is appropriate and what is not. I hope these few guiding principles serve as a refresher.

The bottom line — as a responsible cell phone or PDA user, always be aware of your environment before placing or receiving a call, text messaging, or reading or responding to emails. When you continually have respect and consideration for those around you, others will appreciate your good judgment, concern and overall professionalism.

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