

Cell Phone Etiquette



Connectivity is often seen as the highest virtue in the modern world. Employers, colleagues, and even friends and family expect you to be available at all times. It's easy to forget about your surroundings when you are in the middle of a heated discussion, but it is important to remember that there is a time and place for every type of conversation.

Imagine you're enjoying your dinner in your favorite restaurant while the guy at the table next to you is screaming into his phone. He is extremely agitated, and you overhear him sharing confidential information about his company. An episode like this can turn a nice, relaxing dinner into a source of tension, and can leave you with an uneasy feeling at the end of the night.

Don't let that person be you.

Being available and staying "connected" 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, has become an essential part of many people's lives. Between the laptops, phones, and tablets, it's hard to **disconnect**.

The value we place on connectivity can come with a price, though. As cell phones, tablets, and social media become more prolific and ingrained in the public consciousness, less and less attention is paid to how, when, and where we use our devices.

The result: Our "connectivity" is seen less as a considerate gesture for those who want access to us, and more as an annoyance that can tarnish our reputations and jeopardize our relationships, both personal and professional.

Anyone who has had to listen to an unwanted "second-hand" conversation can agree that there is a proper time and place for every phone call.

That said, cell phones and other devices are not going away anytime soon, nor should they. It's not the technology itself that creates a problem, it's the people without manners who thoughtlessly use the technology. With a little self-assessment, awareness of your surroundings, and a little bit of energy and effort, we can change our habits and fully utilize the positive aspects of a connected lifestyle without having to shoulder any of the negative ones.

Proper Cell Phone Etiquette

Let's take a look at some basic rules that govern the polite use of cell phones and devices, whether in personal or business life. Although almost all of these rules could be boiled down to simple common sense and courtesy, research shows that a massive 68% of people typically ignore them and yet 95% of those surveyed still consider themselves courteous cell phone users. This is an indication of how little self-awareness people have when they need to use the phone or take an incoming call. The research pinpoints why it is now so important to observe the following rules.

1. **Set your phone to silent or vibrate whenever you're in an environment where ringing would be disruptive.**

This could be any number of places, including the theater, church, an art museum, a business meeting, or a crowded elevator. In fact, since your cell phone is almost always on your person when you're out and about, consider using "vibrate" as the default state to avoid embarrassing mishaps.

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Communicate with those who commonly call you. Explain that you are most often available, but that you put your phone on vibrate when you are in public, and you always return the call when you get to a more appropriate location. Let them know your preference for urgent matters – Should they send you a text message or leave you a voicemail? When they understand how you prefer to use your phone, they will cut you some slack, even if they expect you to always be available.

2. Limit your phone calls in public places.

Most guides to cell phone etiquette indicate that you should never talk in public places. While this advice carries some legitimacy, it's not as unbreakable a rule as you might think. It's okay to use your cell phone in public as long as you're considerate to others by being aware of your environment, keep the conversation to a bare minimum, and ensure that the nature of your conversation would not cause offense or embarrassment if overheard. Just as you never want to carry on a conversation of any type in a place such as the theater, you don't ever want to carry on an intimate or private conversation over a cell phone, even in places where a cell phone conversation might otherwise be tolerated, such as a train or on the sidewalk. Also, it is unwise and unprofessional to have any corporate business overheard, no matter what conversation you are taking part in. You never know who could make a judgment call on your conversation and potentially do harm to your organization based on your phone call. Last month, in the airport, I overheard three conversations made by a VP of a large Fortune 500 corporation, describing customers (he even mentioned their names!), sales numbers and projections, and problems he was having with a peer. I didn't think very much of the gentleman's professionalism or lack of regard for the confidentiality of his customer relationships and corporate information.

3. Don't yell.

This may seem silly but honestly, there's no need to yell when using a cell phone. Even when reception is bad, yelling typically tends to make your message all the more indiscernible and does not enable you to be better heard in any way. All it does is draw hostile attention to yourself.

In my dentist's office, a woman was shouting while conversing with her mother. She kept having to repeat herself. One waiting room hostage tapped her on the shoulder and suggested that she lower her voice. The woman snapped back and the gentleman explained that if she lowered her voice, the reception would be better and her mother would be able to hear her better. She tried and it was. She was thrilled with the result of the man's tip. Unfortunately this prolonged the conversation. After she left, I suggested that he add a couple of tips on the length of conversations when in public places to his effective cell phone etiquette advice. At least we had a bit of a laugh to end the miserable experience.

4. Be mindful of your ringtone.

Not all ringtones are appropriate for all environments. People will make judgment calls about your choice of ringtone whether you like it or not. To avoid tarnishing your reputation, it's best to use one of your phone's default ringtones. If you want to be extra safe, just leave it on vibrate.

5. Be considerate of those around you.

Whether you're out with some friends, on a private date, or at a business lunch, interrupting a face-to-face conversation to use your phone tells the person you're with that you consider them less important than whoever is on the other end of the line. It creates tension and can leave a very unfavorable impression.

Whenever possible, put your phone away and give the person you are with your undivided attention. Conversely, if this is impossible, follow a quick glance at your phone screen with an aside like, "Oh, it's nothing too important, I'll get in touch with them later." If you know that you may have to take an emergency call, let the other person know that upfront. You can say something like, "The only calls I **have to take** are from my kids or my boss." These tactics give whoever you're with the impression that they have your utmost attention.

Cell Phone Security Considerations

For those who use cell phones to conduct business, you're not as secure as you think. Although cell phone companies may use "encryption" technology, the signals are decrypted at both ends of the line. Otherwise, you wouldn't be able to receive the call in the first place. The potential holes in security don't end there.

- **Be careful what you say on the phone.**

Although it's unlikely that a call will be intercepted "from the air" where it's still protected by your service provider's encryption, the signals can just as easily be picked up after they've reached your phone or the phone of your associate. There are any number of ways to go about doing this, and the materials needed are becoming increasingly available and less expensive all the time. For this reason, it's advisable to never discuss sensitive business matters over a cell phone. Use the phone to arrange a face-to-face meeting or set up a landline conversation rather than compromise the security of sensitive information.

- **The same goes for emails and text messages.**

Intercepting these is no different from intercepting a phone call. Even if they're not intercepted at the time, traces remain embedded in your phone's firmware long after you've deleted the messages. This means that someone getting access to your physical phone gives them the potential to access all of the e-mails and text messages you've ever sent or received, no matter how long ago you deleted them. Again, treat your phone's text message and e-mail capabilities as a useful tool for **arranging and coordinating** secure meetings, not as a **substitute** for them.

- **Do not use unsecure (not password protected) wireless network connections.**

If you must connect to an unsecure public Wi-Fi connection, avoid submitting any personal information online (credit card numbers, address, social security number, passwords, etc.). Any hacker can connect to the same unsecure wireless network and steal all of the information that you submit.

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- **Be mindful of who is listening.**

Don't get so caught up in all the high-tech ways that an unscrupulous character might violate the integrity of your phone calls, that you overlook the most obvious method of information theft: **good old-fashioned eavesdropping.**

Whenever you use your phone in a public place, you're potentially exposing your secrets to everyone around you, even if they seem to be paying no attention to you. The person sitting behind you on a train, in a restaurant, or even in line at the airport could be there for less than innocent purposes. Industrial espionage through eavesdropping is a centuries-old method for getting the edge on the competition, so don't just chalk the threat up to something that only conspiracy theorists are concerned about. The threat is very real, and it pays to be cautious.

Cell phones are an invaluable asset to your company's communication and productivity. They allow you to arrange spontaneous meetings at a moment's notice and keep in touch over long distances. These advantages, however, carry some very real risks that must be addressed to avoid compromising your organization's sensitive information. Ultimately, the responsibility for security is on your shoulders. Use your cell phone, but use it wisely, and make sure your employees know to do the same through proper training in cell phone etiquette.