

Ms. e-Etiquette on E-mail Manners

By Nur Reinhart

It has come to the attention of Ms. e-Etiquette (no relation of that famous other doyenne except in spirit) that her services are sorely needed to remind gentle readers in the translation community of the proper etiquette for electronic communications. Ms. e-Etiquette is well acquainted with many of the fine translators and hard-working agency representatives in this vital industry. She appreciates their dedication to quality and service, their quest for timely delivery, and their eagerness to use electronic communications to enhance the timeliness of their services. However, Ms. e-Etiquette is also painfully aware that the adoption of a code of manners has not been as speedy as the revolution in electronic communication technology.

The result, as Ms. e-Etiquette observes, has been frustration, some missed deadlines, frantic last-minute efforts, and, Ms. e-Etiquette is loath to admit, even anger on the part of normally mild-mannered people. In the interest of promoting peace and harmony, she has taken it upon herself to compose a compendium of manners for the new electronic age. But Ms. e-Etiquette is going to spare you a diatribe on the universal bane of electronic communications: messages composed in a hurry and sporting more spelling and grammar errors than ads on AOL. Being a realist as well as a traditionalist, she has decided not to engage in futile battles.

Ms. e-Etiquette has been informed that a common occurrence in electronic communications in the translation industry is the daily proliferation of inquiries to translators and translation agencies regarding professional services and rates. She knows this is not problematic as long as the parties have been previously acquainted and current information is all that is needed.

However, in the case of a "cold call," she wishes to set the record straight about proper etiquette. Ms. e-Etiquette hates to belabor the obvious, but she wishes to remind all involved that this relates to a very old social situation dating back thousands of years. When one wishes to be acquainted with a stranger, one needs to introduce oneself. That is why calling cards were invented. With the demise of that charming invention, we

...Remember that the message represents the sender and consider whether that representation is favorable...

now have total strangers making inquiries without providing any information about themselves other than Johnny87965@anonymous.com.

Ms. e-Etiquette's translator friends are critical of people inquiring about a translator's rates, education, specialization, and the like without so much as a word about who they are, where they work, and whether their organization has been in business more than a fortnight. Ms. e-Etiquette has been shocked to learn that there are agencies with less than sterling reputations which freelancers wish to avoid like a bad case of the shingles. She has also been informed that such inquirers who demand information have, on many occasions, not bothered to answer translators' subsequent queries about their companies' backgrounds. She is tempted to say "Shame on them," but she realizes such people probably have no shame.

On the other hand, Ms. e-Etiquette's friends at translation agencies also

complain about receiving cryptic messages saying "I need this by Tuesday," which are signed by BigHarry@bigcountry.com. Much as they wish to accept more work, these kind souls would nonetheless like to know with whom they are working and whether reaching Big Harry to get payment might be a reasonably straightforward process.

Most of Ms. e-Etiquette's friends at translation agencies have, by now, become used to receiving unsolicited résumés from translators via e-mail on a daily basis. They don't mind these as long as the résumés are properly prepared in a recognized common format with accurate information on the translator's education, experience, tools, resources, and contact information. It goes without saying that a short introduction should accompany the attachment of the résumé to offer reasons why the translator may be worth knowing. Having said this, Ms. e-Etiquette would like to remind those wily freelancers, you know who you are, not to disguise their unsolicited mass-mailed résumés with a catchy subject line such as "Free Caribbean Vacation." A professional relationship that may begin with such a "gotcha" may not go further than the delete button.

Ms. e-Etiquette wishes to reiterate that the convenience of speedy electronic communications does not eliminate the vital role a telephone plays in our lives. Indeed, she firmly believes that in the case of assignments with short deadlines, the old telephone is more trustworthy than e-mail. Ms. e-Etiquette has been disturbed to hear of agencies who assign projects to freelancers via e-mail without first confirming the translator's availability or even the translator's bodily presence in the

continental United States. Ms. e-Etiquette regrets to report that deadlines have been missed and last-minute changes of plans have been required with considerable gnashing of teeth. She believes that it is certainly acceptable for busy agency representatives to send brief e-mail inquiries when there is ample time to determine the translator's availability. Should the first one be unavailable, then another qualified professional can be found.

Of course, Ms. e-Etiquette recognizes the implicit trust and confidence shown by agencies toward the translators who are the recipients of such assignments. However, she also wishes to point out that these reliable souls nonetheless feel as if they have let down their clients when they discover projects languishing past their deadline in cyberspace. The lowly telephone, once the pride and joy of every household, could have saved the day. Ms. e-Etiquette trusts that her gentle readers understand that the "call first" rule applies to all last-minute revisions, changes, and other assignments which require a speedy response.

Ms. e-Etiquette knows that many translators have personal ties in foreign countries and are known to visit those countries frequently. In view of the fact that such visits sometimes require long absences, Ms. e-Etiquette wishes to urge her friends at translation agencies to rely on the trusty telephone, especially in the summer, in the name of speed and efficiency

(much as that may sound like an oxymoron to today's ears).

For the sake of fairness, Ms. e-Etiquette also reminds her translator friends that sending advance notices of planned absences to one's long-standing clients in order to avert disaster represents excellent professional manners. It is even more endearing to suggest capable colleagues who may help out during such absences.

Ms. e-Etiquette believes that part of the problem may be related to the discrepancy that exists in the lives of freelancers and translation agency staff. She visualizes her freelance translator friends to be laboring in a home office, eating cold sandwiches at their desks to make deadlines. Some may not even have high speed access, so in their tireless efforts to finish a project, they may not know of the urgent need to change six words in the project done two weeks ago for a multinational conglomerate that wants the change that afternoon.

On the other hand, translation agency representatives, on a steady IV drip of espresso, may be calculating word counts, quotes, and deadlines while coordinating various projects among teams of translators, proofreaders, production people, and demanding corporate clients. In the interest of time, the translation agency representative, who is being pressured by the conglomerate's executive, may be desperately sending e-mails to all the freelancers who translated this document into 26 languages from Albanian to Uzbek.

Ms. e-Etiquette feels his pain, but predicts that a certain percentage of freelancers will never get the message because they are too busy to dial up and check e-mail constantly.

At the expense of sounding like an old fuddy-duddy, Ms. e-Etiquette feels forced to conclude that traditional good manners must still be utilized in the electronic age. She has seen tourists in foreign lands who, under the mistaken notion that being abroad justifies shedding good manners and inhibitions, have behaved badly only to receive the cold contempt and muttered criticisms of the natives. Much as cyberspace may feel like a foreign land to many, the old rules about good manners still matter. When making a cold call, make proper introductions first. Be courteous and professional. Include complete information to be taken seriously. Remember that the message represents the sender and consider whether that representation is favorable. Don't assume that a message sent is a message received. Use the telephone to inform others of urgent projects and last-minute changes. Do unto others...but then Ms. e-Etiquette trusts that you still remember that one.

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