

Mobile communications: a modest proposal

In his 1729 essay *A Modest Proposal* the lacerating satirist Jonathan Swift set forth a method of “preventing the children of poor people in Ireland from being a burden to their parents or country”. His solution, closely and logically argued and based on complex and apparently scientific calculations, was to eat them. In an occasional series readers - and the staff - are invited to make similarly “innovative” suggestions. This month managing editor Mick Owen sets his sights on mobile manners.

You are reading this article, presumably, because you expect a coherent argument presented logically about which you can then form your own opinion. You are not expecting the writer to suddenly offer you a paragraph or two on the state of access arrangements on Welsh rivers or the latest in lawnmowing technology, nor would you appreciate them. Interesting as these subjects are, the contract one makes when one approaches written communication is that both sides will concentrate on the other for the duration.

This is not the expectation, of course, in informal conversation. Sitting over a cup of coffee, walking by a pond or just standing at a bus stop, when we engage in conversation the subject is not set; we are at liberty to busk, to interrupt, to stray from the point. But what of the communications hinterland, the places where formality is imposed on a normally informal channel: the industry conference, the business meeting, the conversation between colleagues, the chat in passing on your way to, or perhaps from, your desk? As the speed and volume of communication increases exponentially to include mobile devices that receive telephone calls and email communication, these can be a challenge for the untrained, a veritable pit of potential falls for the untutored. Given that *The Leisure Review* was conceived in metaphorical wing-backed leather armchairs in a notional gentlemen's club circa 1865 by people who, in their own minds at least, were sporting velvet smoking jackets, we trust you will take this modest proposal on the etiquette of the hand-held personal communication device when used in a business context in the spirit in which it is intended.

They used to publish books on etiquette. And when they got outmoded there were agony aunts in magazines and newspapers to help you decide the most mannerly approach to trying social situations. Nowadays your average agony aunt is discussing the sexual shenanigans of 70-year olds and the best way to confront your alcoholic neighbour about the vomit in the communal hallway so we can hardly look to them for assistance in how best to behave when a message arrives. A message. From the wing-backed chair the modern communications milieu is miasmatic. So many people getting so many messages in so many formats. Texts, emails, Twitter feeds, Facebook pokes, even the odd telephone call – and all to one device and all so very, very important. Or are they? How necessary is it to keep abreast of your work mates' coffee choices? What priority is there on hearing who Arsenal have signed? What level of importance does Stephen Fry's twittering have in your life? In fact, what bad things will follow from you not receiving your boss's latest missive or even your partner's. What makes anything so important that it warrants breaking off mid-sentence from the conversation you are having with the person or people in front of you? If you were on a train with no signal, out of range up a mountain or asleep in a lay-by you would never even know that Jack the Lad had won the 3.30 at Kempton but when you are face to face with another human being who may or may not have some influence to bring to bear in your life you feel you must check every squeak and squawl from your little electronic status-giver. Because that is what it's all about, is it not? The message is not important, is it? You are. Your job is so high-powered that you can't be out of touch for a second. So many things demand your attention that even when you are sitting in a £500-a-day seminar with a world-renowned expert on the platform you have to keep abreast of (or do you say 'across') everything and everybody. You are



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the centre of the universe and the person who you may want a job, a favour or a kind smile from you somewhere down the line is a piece of flotsam on the tide of your importance.

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Here is a modest proposal. Put the thing down. Turn it off, not to silent. Forget it exists. Live in the moment with the people you are sharing it with. Stop being a chump. There are two stories extant that point out in stark relief what is correct behaviour and what is not. There is a woman in America called Trunk who made an entry on her Twitter page announcing or commenting on the fact that she was miscarrying in a board meeting. There are so many things wrong with that sentence, 'America' just being the most obvious. Please pass over her subject matter. What on earth was she doing focusing on her hand-held device when she was involved in a meeting of her company's governing body? What level of ignorance allows her to believe that is appropriate behaviour? Was she tweeting for medical assistance?

The second story involves a government minister at a seminar or some such involving men of the cloth from a number of faiths. Senior people from a variety of religions giving some time to debate an issue key to the minister's brief. Having got on his hind legs and said his piece, our hero sat and surreptitiously palmed his palmtop to begin checking and responding to his messages. As the archbishop of somewhere was making a cogent case for (or against) the motion, a pontiff so senior his job title starts with 'chief' spotted the younger man's thumbings. Did he ignore it? Did he put it down to the weight of ministerial responsibility? Did he heck. He reached over, put his hand on the forearm of the texting politician and when the latter looked up pursed his lips, raised his eyebrows and shook his head. Shame on you, Mr Minister; let's hope your brother has better manners. The world, and certainly the business part of it, would be a better place if we all followed the chastened MP's example and put the blessed things away.

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