

5 Business Communication Etiquette Pet Peeves

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I frequently work with my children to help them understand the importance of good table manners – elbows off the table, how to set a table, which fork to use, how to hold a fork and knife (and properly use them), which glass to drink from, and to *never* chew with their mouths open. Let's just say it is a work in progress.

While these lessons seem obvious, you would be surprised how frequently we get requests for etiquette training for lawyers. But it's a fact that how we present ourselves has a significant impact on our brand. If you are seated next to a lawyer who slurps his soup, uses the wrong fork and drinks from your water glass, how likely are you to hire him?

Like our table manners, our communication etiquette sometimes needs attention, too. After all, good relationships begin with good communication. As a communications professional, here are my five biggest communication pet peeves:

1. **Email Signatures:** It is a best practice to include your telephone number in your email signature, even on the reply. In this day and age, a majority of our business is conducted without ever hearing someone's voice. Sometimes, though, actually talking is the best way to communicate, and it is terribly frustrating to have to go digging through old emails, files and even paper notebooks to find a phone number.

If your law firm doesn't already have a standard email signature protocol, now is the time to institute it. Use it as a way to market your law firm, being mindful not to overwhelm readers with too many ways to reach you. If you are including a graphic, make sure recipients can view it on a mobile device and that it does not make an email too large to open. Your clients will thank you!

2. **Grammar & Spelling:** They're/their, who's/whose, you're/your, it's/its. Learn it, live it, love it. Sure, we all can make mistakes when using our smartphones and blame them on autocorrect, but there are some basic grammar rules that we as legal industry professionals should know.

In addition, try to tighten up your sentences. For example, "I thought I would connect with Jane to discuss," can be rewritten as "I am going to call Jane to discuss," or "Jane and I are going to

discuss.” To put it concisely, be direct.

And take the time to ensure that you do not have any spelling errors. Readers will automatically assume the worst of you – and your intellect – if you misspell words. Spellcheck is not always accurate, so proofread your work. If you are not a great proofreader yourself, enlist the help of a colleague or a professional proofreader before you send documents to clients. With emails, take a few extra seconds before clicking send.

3. **Limit the Word “Just”:** In the spirit of being direct, I want to share my dislike of the word “just.” Improper use of the word often weakens what you are communicating and implies an unspoken apology. I am certainly guilty of using it and am consciously trying to eliminate it from my vocabulary. For example, “I am just following up” suggests that I am sorry to bother you but have something that I think is important to say. “I just have to say” implies that what you have to say is somehow a side note.

Try eliminating the word “just” when you are asking someone to do something for you as well. “Can you just...” minimizes a person’s contributions. Count how many times you use the word “just” in a day, and see if eliminating it helps you become a stronger communicator.

4. **“At Your Earliest Convenience”:** Be careful with this term because, when used the wrong way, it makes you seem lazy and unengaged. It is perfectly fine to ask someone to respond at *their* earliest convenience, but how do you feel when I tell you that I will call you back at *my* earliest convenience? Probably like I will get to you after I drink my coffee and check social media. For most law firm marketers, your “clients” are the attorneys in your firm. They are your most important asset. Make them feel that way, and avoid telling them that you will do something when it is convenient for you. Try “as soon as possible” instead. It feels much better!
5. **Emphasize Sparingly:** When I receive an email that is filled with bold, underlined and all-caps words, I FEEL LIKE I AM BEING YELLED AT and that **whatever isn’t emphasized probably isn’t important!** Think about what you are emphasizing. Is it really crucial? As a general rule of thumb, focus on headers and deadlines to make sure that all of the content of your email is properly read and understood. Then think about using the signature at the bottom of the email to give the person a way to call to confirm.

All of the ways we present ourselves and communicate – both directly and indirectly – impact our personal brands. Making yourself available and easy to communicate with will boost your personal brand, make people feel good about doing business with you, and hopefully drive more business.

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