

Communication Skills: Lecture No.29

Module 9

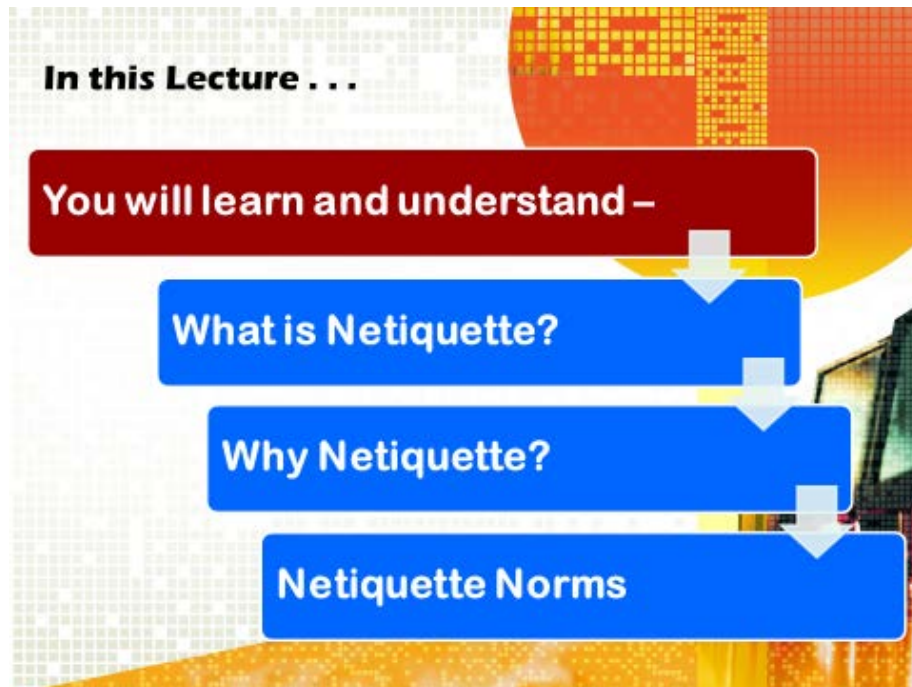
Lecture 1

Netiquette

To begin with, just ponder over the following quote:

“The real danger is not that computers will begin to think like men, but that men will begin to think like computers.” ~Sydney J. Harris

In the age of information technology, communication today has taken for granted the human component. Especially, while interacting on line, people tend to forget that they actually communicate with human beings. They function in a mechanical, robot-like manner. This module on *Netiquette* informs you with essential behavioral norm for effective communication in the cyberspace, particularly by using e-mails.



WHAT IS NETIQUETTE?

‘Netiquette’ is a portmanteau word combined from ‘Internet’/‘network’ and ‘etiquette.’ Simply speaking, ‘etiquette’ is an umbrella term for rules governing socially and culturally acceptable behavior. ‘Netiquette’ thus refers to the correct, polite, acceptable social, official, professional norms, behavioral patterns, and expected decorum for using the Internet or the cyberspace for communication purposes.

WHY NETIQUETTE?

Internet has really contracted the world into a ‘global village.’ Nonetheless, the way the Stone Age man communicated by use of images, symbols and gestures seem to be less complicated than the postmodern, information age of communication! Despite the flow and exchange of information on various channels as Usenet, mailing lists, blogs, forums and chats, the question still remains whether communication is taking place in all these forms in an effective manner or not. The Internet, in its attempt to enlarge the vistas of human mind has actually narrowed down values of the human heart! Today, there are more hate mails, more sites that violate privacy policies, and frequently we hear about hacking of e-mail identities. People misunderstand and lose precious relationships built for years by a casual click of ‘send’ button.

E-mail has become the most used and abused form of cyber-communication. In terms of business communication, for instance, people are generally trained to write business letters and learn the nuances of sending effective letters. However, people do not receive any formal training for sending e-mails. E-mails are, thus, written in an impromptu manner and sent abruptly, often without even giving a second thought to the aspect of communication involved in the transaction process. The result, invariably, is miscommunication. This could be possibly avoided if people learn, understand, and follow simple norms for communication in cyberspace.

Here are some simple netiquette rules for you to follow:



- **Do not forget that the receiver is a human being**

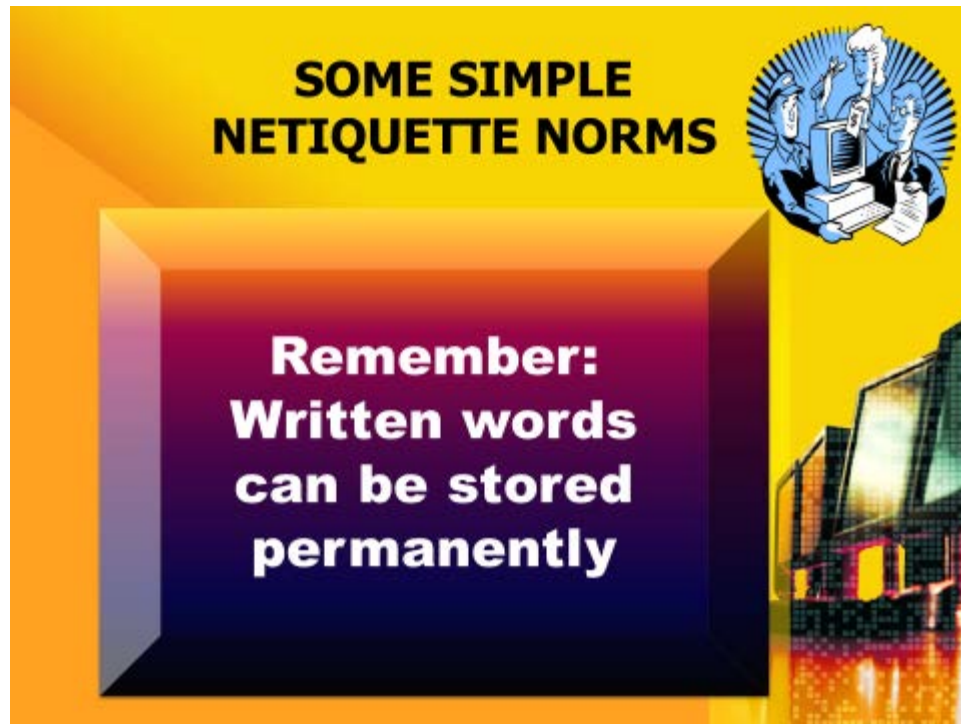
Often when people type a message on the computer and mail it using the internet connection, they tend to forget that the person who receives the mail at the other end is a human being. That is why people write curt messages that can hurt the sentiments of the receiver. Beyond the blank computer screen, one needs to empathize with feelings of the receiver. Unlike in direct, oral communication, where one can see the receiver face-to-face and modify the message according to the receiver's facial expressions, gestures and tonal variations, while using the electronic medium, one has to cut across the impersonal and make a personal appeal through suitable use of words and emoticons. Smileys or emoticons can be used to indicate your mood, or to reduce the monotony of the message you want to convey. Simple type keys as : -) can be used to create the following figures:



Such additions also tell the receiver how much care you take in communicating your message with the right tone and attitude.

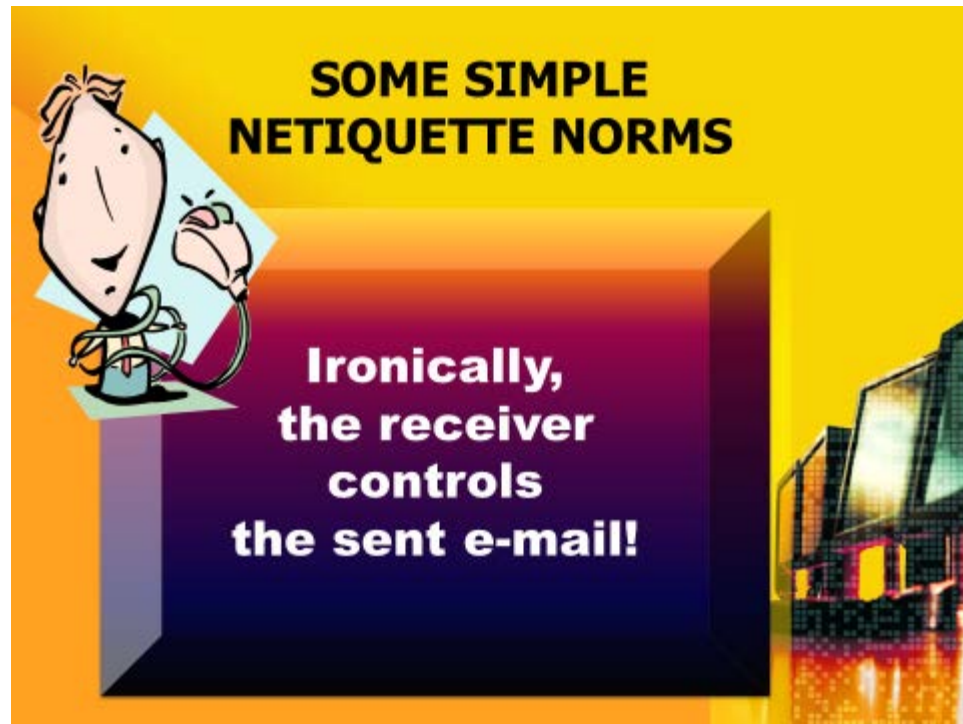
Consideration for others is, thus, the cardinal netiquette principle

one should always keep in mind.



- **Remember: Written words can be stored permanently**

Since written words can be stored permanently, one should be very careful in choosing the right words for communication. An e-mail casually sent can return with so much malignity that the sender regrets throughout his/her life for having sent that one thoughtless mail!



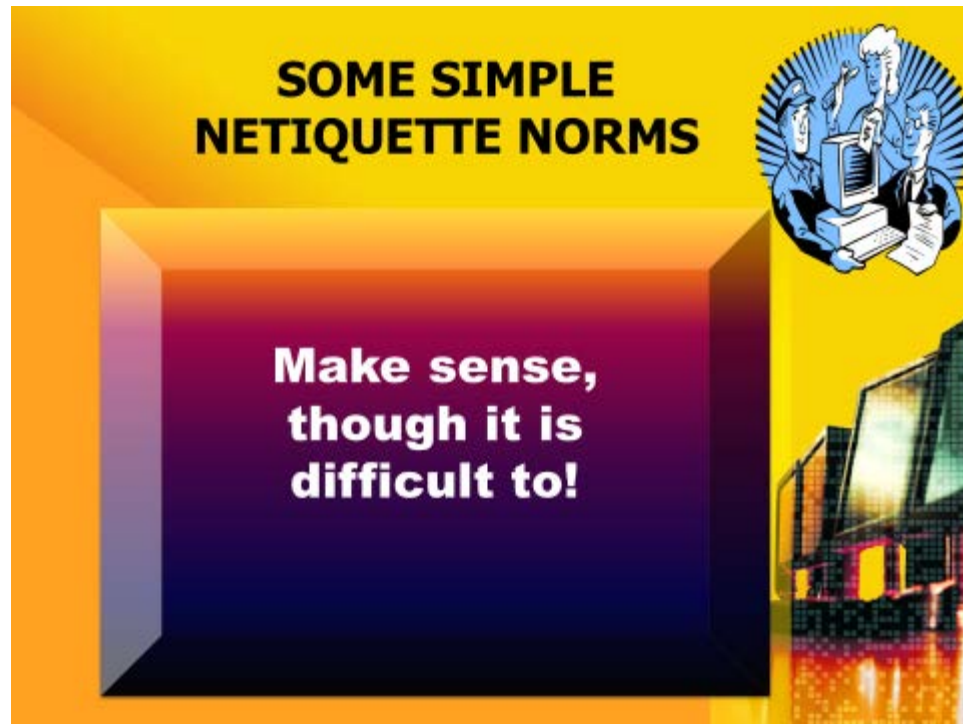
- **Ironically, the receiver controls the sent e-mail!**

You have no control over your e-mails once you press the send button. Once sent, ironically, it is the receiver who has absolute control over your mails! The receiver decides, even if you have requested that the mail be deleted immediately, whether to delete or store the mail for future use. The receiver also can use it against you, send it to numerous others, get a print out of it and post it on public notice boards and put you to shame. So, you have to be careful again in sending a message that would embarrass you if shared with others or exposed to the general public.



- **Be Ethically Correct!**

The old saying, “All is fair in love and war,” may be modified to suit the mind-set of many internet users and as: “All is fair in love, war, and cyberspace.” Or, at least, that is what many network users believe when they post materials which are unethical or communicate by lowering their ethical standards for the internet. While unethical means may win short term gains, to gain a truly professional image one has to maintain high ethical standards in cyberspace too. Because the risk of being caught in unethical practice is very high, and also if caught, it can damage reputation gained over years, one should be ethically correct.



MAKE SENSE, THOUGH IT IS DIFFICULT TO!

It is rather easy to make nonsense in written communication, especially when a person writes whatever comes to his/her mind without bothering to know whether what is expressed clearly reflects his/her thoughts. Making sense is difficult—as it means curtailing some bad writing habit accumulated over a period of time. Avoid using worn-out phrases that do not make any sense in the context. Idiomatic expressions, metaphors and similes, if not used properly, may confuse the reader and lead to miscommunication. Use simple words with short sentence constructions instead of flowery, poly-syllabled words, long and complicated sentences.



SPEND AN EXTRA-MINUTE TO SAVE AN HOUR OF THE RECEIVER!

Often spending some extra minutes could help in saving many hours of the receivers. The extra time can be spent on editing the text, checking the spelling, inserting emoticons, making use of punctuation marks, dividing lengthy matter into readable paragraphs, remembering to type a descriptive subject line, and finally, by not sending an unsolicited and irrelevant mail!

Let us briefly look at each of these aspects in the following sub-sections.



KEEP IT SHORT

Keep your e-mails focused on content and short in length. People generally do not have time to read long mails. There are others, like the CEO of a multinational company whom I met in a flight journey, who by default delete lengthy mails! The thumb rule is that if you cannot convey an idea effectively in a short paragraph you can never do the same in a long essay. In case an e-mail has to be significantly and justifiably lengthy owing to the nature of the subject matter, then use subheadings, paragraph divisions, spaces in between paragraphs to make it easy for reading and understanding.



SUBJECT LINES

Tell me the subject lines that you keep sending, I can tell you who you are! Subject lines, apart from describing the inner content of the matter, have much to tell about you as a person—whether you are sloppy, casual, flippant, uncouth or sincere, serious, meticulous, dedicated, professional, sophisticated and stylish. The worst subject line that an e-mail can have is “[No Subject].” That is, the e-mail is either sent in a hurry without subject line, or the subject is just not thought of. In both the cases, the sender is unmindful of the precious time the receiver has to spend in opening, reading, and understanding the subject, and quite often realize that it is an irrelevant message that needs to be deleted. The subject should clearly express the content at the outset giving freedom to the receiver to exercise an option of opening the mail or deleting it. But, this does not mean that you should use tempting subject lines like: “Free holiday trip to Florida”; “Open and become Bill Gates!”; “Stay young forever.” Nor should you over-emphasize the subject by capitalizing them or by creating a false sense of urgency. As the story goes, the employees of a reputed computer manufacturing company never responded to their manager’s e-mails immediately despite the standard subject line: “URGENT MATTER: RESPOND IMMEDIATELY.” You can easily understand that when the same subject matter is repeated it loses its sense of urgency and emphasis. So, always use a short, descriptive phrase for the subject line indicating the gist of the e-mail. If it is a meeting, mention the time, date and venue in the subject line [e.g.: DPGC Meeting: 21 June 2010, 10 A. M., FB 620]. If it is an e-mail invitation for a talk, you can mention the name of the speaker and the topic on the

subject line [e.g.: Talk on Cybernetics, Kevin Warwick, LH-16, 28 June 10, 4 P. M.] This will help the receiver to have a quick idea about the mail even without opening it.

Let us focus on some more netiquette norms in the next lecture . . .