

Reach Out And Slap Someone

by Tracey Middlekauff and Josh Brustein
Monday, October 21, 2002 12:00 AM -

When Emily Post wrote her landmark book on etiquette in 1922, she advised people not to let small children answer the phone, and thought a businessman committed an appalling breach of etiquette when he told his secretary to place a phone call and then was not available to take it. Now, Post's granddaughter, Cindy Post Senning, executive director of the [Emily Post Institute](#), has a whole new world of phone issues to confront: cell phones and the frequently infuriating behavior of those who use them.

Take the man at the crowded gate at LaGuardia airport, who "was doing major business discussions with dollar amounts," Post Senning says. "Everybody around him had to hear every detail. It was uncomfortable." Because of countless rude intrusions such as this, Post Senning says, "We use cell phone 'etiquette' as an example of what happens when there are no rules."

Convenient and relatively inexpensive, cell phones have become part of the fabric of culture and society. In congested New York, where people pride themselves on being constantly on the run, cell phones are a fact of life. But there are probably as many gripes here as there are phones.

Even incessant cell phone users complain about loud one-sided conversations on trains and buses; about ringing phones interrupting theater performances, sermons and even funerals; about bumping, oblivious chatting pedestrians and the rude airing in public of the most intimate details of a person's life.

Such complaints are winding up at City Hall, where legislators such as Councilmember Phil Reed -- who has introduced two separate bills about cell phones -- are busy trying to address the real risks as well as the nuisances of this rapidly growing phenomenon.

"The majority of people are fed up with the proliferation of chatter," says Reed, "and I feel like somebody needs to legislate etiquette, or just help New Yorkers get some peace of mind."

OF RIGHTS AND RUDENESS

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Last year, some 128 million Americans subscribed to a cell phone service, says the national environmental research organization [INFORM](#) . And a [recent survey](#) found that more than 60 percent of New York City adults owned cell phone last year.

Not surprisingly, some of those people are rude. "Cell phones don't cause rudeness, people do," says Jacqueline Whitmore, etiquette expert with the [Protocol School of Palm Beach](#) . Most Americans think those people are other people. In a survey conducted by the [Metro North commuter rail](#) , 87 percent of the riders said they were bothered by cell phones -- even though 76 percent said they used them. In a "Rudeness in America" study earlier this year, [Public Agenda](#) received hundreds of complaints about cell phone abuse. Forty-nine percent of respondents said that they often encounter people using their cell phones in a loud and abrasive manner, and 40 percent claim to be very bothered by it. While the survey does not have statistics for New York City, it found the problem to be more serious in urban areas than in rural ones.

A [web site](#) promoting good cell phone manners, devotes an entire section to New York City. A person who calls himself Spanker the cell phone spy -- he will not reveal his identity -- seeks out and reports flagrant abuses, such as overhearing a woman on line at the Port Authority bus terminal tell her boyfriend what underwear she had on. "I'm no prude, but some stuff ought to remain private."

LEGISLATING COURTESY

Councilmember Phil Reed has been trying to regulate cell phones since 1999, when he introduced a bill that would have banned them on buses and subways. "People all ride the buses at some point," he said, and having to listen to other passengers talking on cell phones "just drives you out of your mind." But the bill died before being seriously considered. "I think that the previous leadership just didn't get it." Reed believes that now the time is right. This summer, the council enacted a [monthly 35 cent surcharge](#) on all wireless devices in New York City. Reed now wants to go beyond simply cashing in on cell phones. He wants to reel them in as well.

He has re-introduced his bus and subway bill, and he has proposed another bill, for which he is conducting a hearing this week in the City Council's consumer affairs committee, that would prohibit the use of cell phones in performance places such as movie houses and Broadway theaters, but not outdoor locations such as sporting events. The proposed fine is \$50. "The

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misuse of cell phones has made it more difficult to enjoy the arts in New York."

Cell Phone Etiquette

Here are some tips on how to use your phone courteously.

--Make it silent. Turn off your phone, or at least set it to vibrate, at movies, plays, religious services, meetings, etc.

--Turn it off. When an establishment, such as an airline or hospital, asks you to turn off the phone, do so.

--Speak softly. Respect your privacy and that of others. Don't speak loudly into the phone while in a crowd.

--Make it short. In public places, keep your conversations as brief as possible.

--Be alert. Don't become so distracted by your conversation that you bump into others or ignore people who are talking to you.

--Obey the law. Don't use a cell phone while driving unless you have a hands-free model. If you get an infraction, you could be fined or even have your license suspended.

(Compiled from various [web sites](http://www.letsites.com) on cell phone etiquette, including

At a recent hearing, theater lovers hailed the measure. When a cell phone rings during a performance, "the damage to the art created on stage is palpable," said Barbara Janowitz, speaking on behalf of the League of American Theatres and Producers. "The mood is broken. The audience abruptly loses the thread of the play or musical, forgetting that they have been transported to 1920s New York City, or Paris in the 1800s, or the Oklahoma territory. The actors lose their link to their characters, and have to fight to remember their place in the script and regain the special bond they have forged with the audience."

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Greg Elmer of the Association of Theatrical Press Agents and Managers agreed. "You can not stop a jerk from being a jerk. They are self-centered, nobody else on the face of the earth matters," said Elmer, his voice and even his hands quivering with rage. "The only way you are going to curb them is a law.'

Some council members, however, questioned whether a law would help. "As much as we'd like to, I think that it is very difficult to legislate against inconsiderate jerks," said [John Liu](#) . "And this is New York, and unfortunately, we have our share of inconsiderate jerks."

Robert Sunshine, executive director of the Association of Theater Owners of New York State, thinks such a law would be difficult to enforce and could create confrontations between theater employees and belligerent cell phone users. "The interaction of ushers and management with sometimes unstable patrons of theatres can create terrible, terrible scenes," he said.

But some politicians argue the bill could reduce those simmering tensions. "If we don't get in control of this, then the patrons will," said [Councilmember Charles Barron](#) . "I've seen potential conflicts where people try to [stop others from talking on cell phones] because they are annoyed and aggravated by it. That's what my main concern is -- that the movie goers who are opposed to the cell phones will yell out, "Hey, turn off the phone." And you're going to get serious conflict occurring."

CALLERS ON A TRAIN

Councilmember Reed has mounted a challenge to the wireless phones on another front: the subway system. For now at least cell phones remain silent on much of the system because the devices do not work underground. But one wireless service provider, Sprint, is talking with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority about wiring some high-traffic subway stations and long underground stretches for cell phone use. Customers have been "coming to us and wanting to be connected underground," says Steve Bugg, director of marketing sales and operations for Sprint.

Reed wants to make sure that does not happen --- and hopes [to bar](#) cell phones from buses as well. "People are trying to find some space where there's some quiet," he says.

In an informal poll on the [Straphanger's Campaign](#) web site last February, 45.2 percent were in

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favor of wiring the subway system for cell phones, and 54.8 percent were opposed. "Many people view the subway as a sanctuary," the campaign's Neysa Pranger says. "I don't know if anyone should go messing with that culture."

Amtrak has instituted a "Quiet Car" on almost all trains that run in the Northeast Corridor (between Washington, New York and Boston). In the Quiet Cars, cellular phones, pagers and loud conversations are banned. "The company's trains will be a place where all people can live in harmony -- regardless of their feelings for portable communication," says Stan Bagley, president of Amtrak's Northeast Corridor.

Metro North [has said](#) implementing such a policy on its trains would be difficult because, during the crowded rush hour, commuters dash for whatever space is available and would not be able to determine whether cell phone use is banned or approved in their car. Instead, the train line urges people to speak softly and move to car vestibules for long conversations. Similarly, the [Long Island Rail Road](#) urges its passengers using "cutting edge technology" to "show cutting-edge courtesy."

PHONING AND DRIVING

While cell phones on trains can enrage people, cell phones in cars may injure or even kill them. Motorists talking on cell phones while driving are four times more likely to get into accidents than their silent counterparts, according to a study published in 1997 in the [New England Journal of Medicine](#) concluded.

In response, last year New York became the first state to ban the use of cell phones, except for the hands-free models, while driving. Violation of the law carries a \$100 fine. Other states have since followed suit, instituting a range of acceptable driving-while-gabbing guidelines. The bill was signed into law in June 2001. Ticketing for the offense began last November, though, between December and March, violators could have their tickets waived if they purchased a hands-free device.

The law has been a boon to manufacturers of hands-free technology. California-based [Plantronics](#), which made the headset Neil Armstrong wore on the moon, saw a dramatic rise in sales after the New York law passed. This phenomenon may be responsible for the rise in New York pedestrians who walk down the street talking into tiny headsets, prompting others to wonder

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why so many more people are suddenly talking to themselves. (It has also inspired at least one wag to update an old Lily Tomlin joke, and suggest that the city should start a beautification campaign by handing out cell phones to every street person who really IS talking to himself, so that it looks as if he is talking on the phone.)

Another company, [TDK Systems](#) has developed technology that allows motorists to connect their mobile phones to their vehicle's electrical system, so that the phone sound comes out through the radio.

HEALTH HAZARDS

But is phoning while driving the only risk? In 1992, a Florida man filed a lawsuit alleging that cell phones caused his wife's fatal brain cancer. The court dismissed his suit, but since then a number of researchers have investigated whether the radiation from cell phone use causes brain cancer. Most of the studies have not found such a link, two experts, Kenneth R. Foster and John E Moulder concluded in an [article in IEEE Spectrum](#), although they called for additional research. They said people concerned about possible hazards might want to use an external earpiece that keeps the phone away from their heads and use their phones less. "Neither of us would recommend such measures on health grounds," they wrote, "but people can decide for themselves whether to take such precautions."

But more studies are emerging that raise new doubts about the safety of cell phones, David Kirkpatrick [reports in Fortune](#) "Anybody who tells you that cell phones are either safe or unsafe doesn't know what they're talking about," Louis Slesin, editor of Microwave News, told him. "It remains an open question."

For some people, including those who drive in isolated or unsafe areas, cell phones represent a kind of life line, a way to call for help. The New York City Department of Education officially banned cell phones in the schools. But after the September 11 attacks, when parents and students were desperately trying to get in touch with one another, many schools began to allow cell phones as long as students keep them turned off during class.

Interestingly, New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein [proposed a plan](#) last week that might encourage cell phone use. He suggests that schools rent roof space for cell phone antenna. In return, the schools would get much needed money and free or discounted cell phones and connections to the Internet. Companies must submit bids for the space by November 13. Suburban school districts have floated similar proposals, but parents have

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balked, citing fears that the tower would emit harmful microwaves.

THE PRIVATE SECTOR

While governments debate what to do about cell phones, some in the private sector have already taken action. Sunrise Express, a bus line that runs between Long Island and New York City, banned cell phones over a year ago, after customer complaints (the phones also interfered with the driver's on-board radio). Customers can only use their phones for emergencies, or to arrange rides home from the station. Although there is no mandated punishment for breaking the rule, company representatives report that people "usually cooperate."

Restaurants have become another battleground. If patrons can afford to eat at Aureole, a chichi spot on the Upper East Side, they can buy themselves an evening of relative freedom from electronic devices and concentrate on their mustard-crusting scallops or caramelized guinea hens. But at Dojo, a popular stop for bargain eats in the Village, no such controls apply. "This is not a quiet environment," the host explains.

Faced with public irritation, wireless companies themselves have jumped on the polite bandwagon. Cingular Wireless's ["Be Sensible," campaign](#) tries to educate users about how to use their phones in a safe and courteous manner.

Such advice really boils down to common sense, says etiquette maven Cindy Post Senning -- or at least, it should. When you're in a public place, keep it "quick and short," she says. In a more social setting, "just turn them off," unless you're expecting an important call, in which case, take advantage of vibrate mode. "Think about the person next to you," Post Senning urges.

FLAUNT THAT PHONE!

But to some, such discretion misses the point. Cell phones represent freedom, says [Mark Montano](#), a Lower East Side designer. In his recent Fashion Week show, Montano sent models down the runway with Sprint PCS "Vision Phones." "We can go wherever, and do whatever we want," he enthuses, and cell phones are part of that.

The cell phone don'ts for Montano have nothing to do with modulated voices or brief conversations. Never, ever carry a klunky big phone hanging off a belt. "People really do have

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those," Montano says with disbelief. He suggests carrying a small phone in a "little teeny disco bag or chain purse" or painting the phone with Sally Hansen chrome nail polish.

Montano's attitude does not surprise Sam Binkley, who teaches a class at New School University entitled "Consuming New York." People in New York "are constantly being looked at by strangers" and want to make an impression, he says. One way to do that is to walk down the street, using a trendy cell phone, conveying both fashion sense and popularity --- after all, they have someone to talk to. And so, says Binkley, wireless culture "turns the sidewalks even more into high school" than they already are. No wonder so many people find them irritating.