

MIKE HENNING'S

“ALL IN THE FAMILY” COLUMN



Rude Americans Can Equal Rude Employees

Like many of you, I travel a lot and during the last 20 years of my life have been out in hotels about 90 to 100 nights per year. Also like you, I have plenty of experience with people who work in service businesses that support the traveler. What a hoot! In most hotels, airports, restaurants and car rental agencies you are likely to hear people conducting serious business on cell phones or telling their child how much they miss them and kissing them good night. We experience self-absorbed communication gadgets and other instant gratification toys that clearly strain common courtesies in all sorts of situations. For travelers, when you add to this lack of civility the strain of security checks at airports and fewer and fewer flights, life “out on the road” is certainly requiring more and more patience.

To compound the situation, upon arriving at a hotel, the desk clerk responds with a statement of “no problem” when you request a non-smoking room, but with a tone that infers it would be a problem for them, except it is part of their job description and they have to do it, like it or not. Wouldn’t you just like to grab them by the shirt collar one time! Almost anywhere one travels, shops or eats out we hear the words “no problem” being exchanged for thank you or you’re welcome. I don’t know about you, but it seems out of place and rude to me. So I did a little research on the subject and here are a few things I discovered.

According to Peter Post, a descendant of etiquette expert Emily Post, “A slippage in manners is obvious to many Americans.” He cites an Associated Press-Ipsos poll that clearly indicates 70 percent of those questioned say people are ruder than they were 20 years ago. Additionally, 93 percent faulted parents for failing to teach their children well. Why? It seems those of us who grew-up in the 60s did not stress the importance of manners, such as opening a door for a female or dressing properly for certain occasions.

Peggy Newfield of Personal Best whose focus for her business is teaching corporate employees about etiquette, comments, “that the media cannot seem to show enough sulking athletes and boorish celebrities from Hollywood glorifying crude behavior.”

Thus, TV watchers get to regularly hear swear words, see obscene gestures, and pornography in the so called “family-room.” How can our actions, communication and manners not suffer if we take in a constant diet of TV shows that display such behavior?

During the past century, the English language has added an average of 900 words a year. According to Richard Lederer, co-host of Public Radio's A Way With Words, as the newly minted words have added to the currency of our language, the meanings of the words we grew up with have changed. For example, crack means more than a small opening, ice more than frozen water, and pot more than a cooking utensil and bar code is no longer ethics for lawyers or etiquette of behavior in a café. Gay is seldom heard as exuberant or high-spirited, but was made popular by activist of the Gay Liberation and homosexual community—and many heterosexuals have lamented that a perfectly wonderful word has been “word napped” and it is okay. As Lederer laments, “the gay community needs this word as an emblem of self-esteem, as it is a more fulfilling word than homosexual—because it communicates a culture rather than concentrating on sexual orientation. For those who lament the loss of gay, I recommend that they be merry.”

I'm not sure I have the answers to all the above situations, or the fact that the me-first attitude, youngsters in school who show little if any respect for authority and the young adults who have known nothing but the conveniences of computers and cell phones and other devices that take them away from face-to-face encounters and make them downright annoying in a crowd, can really be changed in the near future. But I still don't have to like it. No, I don't have to like or accept comments like “sorry about that” or “no problem” from employees who have not been taught there is a more acceptable way. Examples of companies where employees and management use terms like “thank you, your welcome, it is my pleasure to serve you, or we are sorry about that inconvenience, we'll take care of it right away” are Marriott, Steak 'n Shake, Federal Express, Enterprise Car Rental, to mention a few. If your employee training program does not address the “Rude American” issue, you might want to give it some attention.

This article appeared in Mike Henning's Family Firm Advisor newsletter, for more information about receiving one free copy of our newsletter, visit us at our web site: www.mikehenning.com, e-mail: hfbc@mikehenning.com or call -- 217-342-3728. Mike Henning is a nationally and internationally respected consultant and speaker on family business issues.