



Technology Corner

By Joseph G. Hodges, Jr.

Internet Netiquette—What Is It and Why Is It Important?

As a moderator of and participant on numerous e-mail discussion lists, often called “listservs,” (many of which relate to topics of interest to those of us who specialize in estate planning and administration or related fields of interest), I have become acutely aware over time of both the existence and importance of what is commonly referred to as “Internet Netiquette.”

Just what is this thing called “Internet Netiquette”? Basically, it is a set of rules of network etiquette that attempt to define what is considered to be proper and improper behavior with reference to online communications, particularly as they might apply to those who participate in various e-mail discussion groups.

There are some problems with these “rules of the road” that make them difficult to learn about and consistently apply, especially for subscribers who may be new to the Internet or a particular discussion group.

One problem is that these “rules” are usually nothing more than mere guidelines for what is considered by most users to be acceptable behavior when participating in a given discussion forum. Thus, they do not rise to the level of laws for which one can necessarily be punished for violating. However, discussion list owners and moderators often discipline uncooperative users for repeated violations after suitable warnings. This is often done by using such techniques as putting the user on review status, whereby each posting by that user has to be reviewed and approved for posting, or even by unsubscribing the user from the list for an appropriate period of time.

Another problem is that a given discussion forum may have particular rules of conduct that apply just to it. A common one is whether unsolicited commercial messages promoting someone’s product or service are allowed. Another common one is who is allowed to subscribe and/or post mes-

sages to a given list, as many lists are “closed” lists that typically require some sort of organization membership status in order to participate, whereas others are considered open to the general public at large. Still others may be closed lists that have a searchable public archive of all prior postings to that list.

One of the biggest problems is that many of these rules, while well known to many of us, are largely passed along and applied by word-of-mouth and the trial-and-error experiences people have when they participate in e-mail discussion lists. This is not exactly the most informative or productive way to learn about these rules and how to abide by them. Thus, I will touch on some of the more important and useful ones here in the hopes that doing so will help to make your participation on such discussion lists more rewarding and beneficial.

Several people have attempted over time to either digest or write in depth about this subject with varying degrees of success. However, I have found the following three resources to be among the better ones in terms of their coverage of the subject.

The first is RFC Memo No. 1855, which was developed by the Responsible Use of the Network (RUN) Working Group of the InterNIC Internet Etiquette Task Force and authored by Sally Hambridge of Intel Corporation. A copy of the October 1995 version of this 12-page document is currently available online at the Delaware Tech Web site at www.dtcc.edu/cs/rfc1955.html. As this document states in the beginning, it is intended to provide “a minimum set of guidelines for Network Etiquette (Netiquette) which organizations may take and adapt for their own use.” Thus, it serves mainly as

Joseph G. Hodges, Jr. is an attorney in Denver, Colorado and serves as Co-Chair of the ABA’s Real Property, Probate and Trust Law Section Technology Committee.

a good starting point and not as the absolute gospel on the subject. Also, its coverage goes beyond what the memo calls “one-to-many communications,” which include mailing lists and discussion forums. It also deals with “one-on-one” communications, such as regular e-mails and chat rooms, and information services, such as Web and document download sites. It also contains a rather extensive bibliography of helpful additional reference sources.

The second resource is the HTML article entitled, *The Net: User Guidelines and Netiquette* by Arlene H. Rinaldi of Florida Atlantic University. The full text of this article, which was published in 1998, can be found on the University's Web site at <http://ns1/fau.edu/netiquette/net/index.html>. Although this guide was specifically written to establish the Internet protocols for users who are at the University, it is a helpful guide to follow in developing similar protocols for other forms of electronic communication, including discussion forums. Its coverage is broad, yet concise, and it includes guidelines not only for discussion groups but also for many other forms of Internet electronic communications, such as Telnet and FTP (file transfer) protocols. It also has a bibliography and an FAQ section that contains further helpful materials.

The third resource is perhaps the best source currently available and was written by the “Ms. Manners” of the Internet. It is the book entitled *NETIQUETTE* by Virginia Shea that was published in May of 1994 by Albion Books. A full-text Web version of the entire contents of the book is available online at the Albion Books Web site at www.albion.com/netiquette. Also included at that Web site are a Netiquette quiz for use in testing one's own knowledge of network etiquette and a link for subscribing to the Netiquette discussion forum that is hosted by Albion Books.

Of particular interest in the Shea book are what the author defines as “The Core Rules of Netiquette,” as these rules present an excellent but concise overview of this subject. The introduction to these rules states that the book itself has a dual purpose: “to help net newbies minimize their mistakes, and to help experienced cyberspace travelers help the newbies.” It goes on to state that the Core Rules and their explanations, having been condensed out of the book itself, are offered “as a set of general guidelines for cyberspace behavior.” Here, in abbreviated format, are those 10 Core Rules and what they cover.

Rule 1: Remember the Human. This rule, which grows out of the impersonal nature of communicating *via* the Internet, where the users typically do not see each other and speak face-to-face, emphasizes the need to remember that all this communication is being done by real people but in an environment where the written word alone often does not accurately convey the true intended meaning and tenor of the sender's words.

Rule 2: Adhere to the Same Standards of Behavior Online That You Follow in Real Life. The author notes that many people who use the Internet for communications seem to think that a lower standard of ethics and personal behavior is acceptable there, when in fact, the ethical considerations are the same because the communication is between human beings—albeit *via* words that are typed on computer screens.

Rule 3: Know Where You Are in Cyberspace. The gist of this rule as it applies to discussion forums is that it is important to understand the culture of a given discussion list before jumping in as an active participant. This can be easily done by joining but then simply “lurking” for a while and by examining the archives of past list message traffic.

Rule 4: Respect Other People's Time and Bandwidth. This rule has several ramifications to it, many of which are dictated by the limitations of the Internet itself and the numerous diverse networks and e-mail systems that the various list participants use. There are transmission limitations that are dictated by the speed with which each user is connected to the Internet. There are space limitations in terms of the subscriber's own hard disks and the storage and throughput capacity of their host systems. There are time limitations in terms of how much e-mail each of us can absorb at any one time.

Rule 5: Make Yourself Look Good Online. Since people cannot see you when you are participating in a discussion forum, your written word becomes the true reflection of your personality, so it becomes even more important to be careful about what you say and how you say it.

Rule 6: Share Expert Knowledge. This rule is perhaps most important when it comes to the sort of discussion lists that those of us who are involved in estate planning and administration typically subscribe to, as the primary purpose of such lists is to permit the free sharing and discussion of expert knowledge and information. However, it is impor-

tant not to abuse the privileges of belonging to such a list by constantly asking for answers to questions without having first researched the issue yourself and come to some sort of a conclusion based on the same. In addition, since such questions are often responded to in part by e-mails that are sent just to the sender, it is only courteous to later post to the list a summary of the answers you have received and the conclusions you have reached based on the same.

Rule 7: Help Keep Flame Wars Under Control. Such wars typically occur when someone holds a particularly strong opinion about a subject the discussion of which soon degenerates into a heated battle of words back and forth between a select few of the list subscribers. Such wars not only can destroy the congeniality of a discussion list but are a huge waste of everyone's time and bandwidth and should be avoided at all costs.

Rule 8: Respect Other People's Privacy. As applied to discussion lists, the point to remember here is that communications on such lists are instantaneous and go to everyone. Thus, if someone responds privately to a posted message, it is normally intended to remain as such and should not be rebroadcast or forwarded to the entire list without the permission of both parties. The flip side of this is that everything that is posted on a public list becomes just that and often can be read by anyone almost anywhere in the world.

Rule 9: Don't Abuse Your Power. As applied to discussion lists, this rule means list users should be respectful of those on the list who may not know as much as they do or who seem to ask what appear to others to be rather basic questions, as these lists and their archives are as much a research and learning tool as they are a discussion tool.

Rule 10: Be Forgiving of Other People's Mistakes. Essentially, this means that we were all newbies on the Internet at one time in our lives. Thus, in spite of all these rules, we need to be gentle with those who may not have learned them yet and not publicly admonish them unless and until it is deserved.

With these Core Rules of Netiquette in mind, here are a few rules that I have developed over time that can serve users well when they are participating on a discussion list:

- Save the Welcome and List Manager messages you usually receive when you first join the list, as these typically contain the specific rules of the

road for that list and tell you how to manage your subscription to it.

- Lurk for a while before posting your first question or reply so you can gain a feel for who is actively participating on the list and what sort of discussion topics and responses seem appropriate and acceptable.
- Always check the list archive before asking a question to see if it has already been asked and adequately answered.
- Be sure the subject line of your message accurately reflects the substantive content of your message so others can easily determine from that line if the message content deals with a topic that interests them and so all responses related to it can be properly archived together.
- Make sure your postings are as accurate as possible, as misinformation can spread quickly *via* the Internet, and don't assume that all postings you read are as accurate as they may seem to be.
- Avoid posting cryptic "me too" or "I agree" or "thank you" messages to the entire list. If you must, send those privately just to the individuals in question.
- When responding to a specific message, edit out of it as much of the text of the original message as is possible while still leaving enough of it in your reply to give the reader an accurate idea of what specific message or parts thereof you are responding to.
- Be careful, when responding to a list message, to determine whether your reply will be going to the entire list as opposed to just the sender, as not all lists handle "Reply" and "Reply to All" response selections the same way and your reply may be intended for the sender only.
- If you use an autoresponder telling people when you are out of the office or on vacation, either set your system so it will not respond to any list messages or set yourself to "no mail" or unsubscribe from the list until you return.
- Send subscribe and unsubscribe messages to the list command e-mail address, not to the list message posting e-mail address.
- Always sign your posts in a way that tells people who you are and what your e-mail address is so they can respond to you personally, but try to limit your signature block to no more than four lines.

- Avoid using all CAPS in your messages, as it is considered a form of shouting and makes the text more difficult to read.
 - Be careful about using shorthand expressions and acronyms if certain subscribers to the list may not understand what they stand for.
 - If your posting concerns only a certain geographic region, so indicate in the subject line.
-

This Issue's Featured Web Sites:

- www.techcourt.com/index.html—Present and Future Court Technologies
- www.lawtechnology.org/survstat.html—2001 ABA LTRC Technology Survey
- www.ncsconline.org—The National Center for State Courts
- www.pcworld.com/downloads/file_description/0,fid,22272,tk,hsx,00.asp—Download Free F-Secure Antivirus Klez Removal Tool

This article is reprinted with the publisher's permission from the JOURNAL OF PRACTICAL ESTATE PLANNING, a bi-monthly journal published by **CCH INCORPORATED**. Copying or distribution without the publisher's permission is prohibited. To subscribe to the JOURNAL OF PRACTICAL ESTATE PLANNING or other **CCH** Journals please call 800-449-8114 or visit www.tax.cchgroup.com.

