

Cellphone and BlackBerry® Etiquette: A Short Refresher



BlackBerry beeps and cell phone rings have become part of the cacophony of everyday background noise. That doesn't make it right, or any less annoying, when you force someone else to listen to the din.

There's no doubt cellphones and their progeny, BlackBerrys and smart phones, have transformed how, where and when we communicate with each other. They are truly practical and helpful devices when it comes to keeping in touch and co-ordinating activities in both our professional and our personal lives. And in some circumstances they are even essential (although there are great differences of opinion as to what exactly constitutes an "essential" call – more on that later).

However, several incidents over the past few weeks have compelled me to write a column on the etiquette of wireless devices. As you will learn, I'm of the general opinion that they can be seen but should not be heard.

Beeping keyboards and raucous ringtones

I recently sat through a conference keynote presentation while some bozo two rows behind me pounded away on his BlackBerry. How did I even know someone behind me was working on a BlackBerry? Because his keyboard beeper was turned on! Everyone around him had to sit there and listen to every letter of every word in every message being typed. Beep ... beep, beep, beep ... beep, beep.... I was steamed and ready to throw something at him, as I'm sure were many others there. I don't understand why he didn't realize he was being extremely disruptive and upsetting people.

Please, everyone, turn that keyboard beeper off

And the same goes for putting a stopper in raucous ringtones. I'm all for total freedom in musical tastes, and I don't care if you're a Britney Spears or an AC/DC fan. I just don't think you have to proclaim your musical preferences for all the world to hear in a blaring, personalized ringtone,

especially in the middle of a meeting or presentation. Cellphones aren't for listening to music – iPods are. (That's why they have earphones!)

So how do you have your cellphone ring without letting the whole world know? Set your phone to ring at the lowest possible volume, or even better, use the vibrating ring. This lets you feel a little nudge on your hip that no one else knows about or hears. It usually works nicely, although some units vibrate a tad louder than they should. (If you have one of those, check its instructions to learn if you can tone it down a bit.)

Two's a party, three's a crowd

I want to talk about people who place their cellphones or BlackBerrys on the table at a meeting, lunch or dinner. Does anyone actually need to do that? I suggest not. It is really an intrusion – you're bringing an extra, uninvited guest to the table by doing so. It can also be a real distraction, especially if you're constantly checking it out of the corner of your eye, and even more so if you're actively reading messages, RSS feeds or other incoming info. Yes, it might help with topics for the dinner conversation, but to be honest, if I truly wanted real-time updates on the score of the Texas Longhorn's football game, I would have stayed home and watched it on TV.

As for meetings, okay, they can be boring – but they will be more productive and shorter when everyone pays full attention to what is going on.

And ditto for texting and instant messaging! In a meeting or meal setting, texting or instant messaging someone is no different from turning away from the person you're talking to and striking up a conversation with someone else. It's rude, so don't do it.

What if you find yourself really needing to bring a cellphone into a meeting when there is a truly urgent matter pending about which you're awaiting news? And I mean truly urgent – say, for example, that your wife is two weeks overdue and

could give birth at any minute. Let's be honest, most calls from most clients are not that urgent.

First, at the start of the meeting simply let people know that you may get a call (and even why, if appropriate) and that you may have to excuse yourself when it comes in. Next, set your ringer on vibrate or silent flash – and make sure your phone is easily accessible, so you can avoid diving into and digging around the bottom of your bag looking for it.

Lastly, when the phone goes off, leave the room in the least disruptive manner possible. This means holding off on answering the call and starting the conversation until you are completely out of the room.

It shouldn't require a stick over the head

In some courtrooms in Ontario, cellphones are confiscated if they ring in court. And outside of the legal sphere, BlackBerry-free zones are starting to crop up in restaurants. Do we have to get stricter? Perhaps we should demand that all wireless devices be checked at the door.

Remember that using a BlackBerry or a cellphone is a privilege, not a right. In professional and personal surroundings, be discrete, courteous and considerate to those around you. Client confidences should be protected, and the rest of the world shouldn't have to be bored by the intimate details and dirt of your personal calls. If you must talk on a cellphone in the presence of others, do so with a quiet voice and keep it short. For longer calls, please put yourself in a virtual phone booth by placing walls or distance between yourself and those who are near you.

A little consideration for others will go a long way and make the world a more peaceful place for all of us.

Dan Pinnington is director of practicePRO, LAWPRO's risk and practice management program. He can be reached at dan.pinnington@lawpro.ca.