

Is That *My* Garbage Can?

Julie Todaro

I often fixate on one sentence or phrase I hear between column deadlines. I jot these sentences or phrases down on napkins, barf bags (forgive me) on airplanes, the backs of envelopes (exactly like the Gettysburg address without the skilled writing or sense of history) and a variety of other paper goods. I also text or e-mail ideas to myself, and leave phone messages on my cell or office phone. Several times lately I have turned to people (yes, I know them!) around me and said, “don’t forget to say . . . *X* to me when we get out of this meeting.” Although, obviously, this shifts the “remembering” responsibility to others; basically, this just shows that I will do anything to get the idea down.

I get these sentences or phrases from people I work with, television, movies, pop-culture publications (Yes, Virginia, I have a subscription to *People*), and from the people in my social network including my incredibly witty friends (we’re the funniest people we know) and—as I’ve said in many columns—my mother. She is a particularly good person to observe or listen to. Completely removed from the higher-tech world I inhabit every second of every day, she offers a point of view that serves to point out the truly obvious but unspoken (the “emperor with no clothes” fame), humble the mighty, and uncover the absurdity of any situation. More negative than positive (see, I come by it honestly), I can’t record everything she says for public consumption (trust me on this), but for you (my fan base of dozens or maybe six) I separate the twenty-first century wheat from the chaff and bring it out for the “truth is out there” table.

So, my mother . . . here is a woman who can operate any sewing machine with the skill of a brain surgeon (exclusive of one possessed knitting machine in the sixties) but has attempted and rejected the use of a photocopier and tolerates but rarely uses her cell phone and microwave. One of the first twenty-first-century-driven comments she made was in the mid-80s. She came over to my apartment and sat down at the computer with me to dictate a few things . . . a recipe to enter into a contest, a letter to an (un) loved one, and a list of medications. As I moved the mouse around, the cursor bounced from word to word for highlighting, font, and emphasis and—after a few minutes—she leaned forward and pointed to the cursor and said, “That little guy there does all the work, doesn’t he?”

I was captivated by the thought and have since enjoyed cursors as they grew and shrunk in size (the e-mail male joke . . . ’nuff said), the substitutions of blinking cursor indicators such as lines for arrows and arrows for lines, the speeding up and slowing down of cursor blinking speed, the substitutions of animals for a cursor image (I hate these) and the blinking jalapeño cursor that appears to have been designed in the ninth circle of hell. But in the workplace, even the tiniest techie guy (or gal)—whether he or she does all the work or not—needs your attention. Over the years I’ve learned:

- Cursors that blink too fast bring on a variety of medical issues in employees and patrons including migraines and seizures.
- Colorful cursors often can’t be seen by those with a variety of levels of color blindness.
- Cursors supplanted by cute animals throw off hand/eye coordination.

Cursors—the tiniest of our technology friends brought to my attention by my mother—need love too. Who knew?

Not one to miss a training opportunity or teachable moment, much less a chance for a great Luddite or anti-techie phrase, I sometimes push my mother toward the envelope. For years I tried to get her to visit the Web with me, but to no avail and much grumbling. I came home one day, however, to her request to visit a Martha Stewart Web site advertised that morning on television. The rest is history . . . she doesn’t understand how it works or how to care how it gets there, but now she “gets it” that there is much dynamic information online. Many other twenty-first-century nonissues and areas for her include:

- She hates the size of most new technologies. As they get smaller she gets more frustrated. While smaller has its advantages, typically smaller letters or numbers aren’t easier to see and the item isn’t easier to use nor more hardy for tech “appliances.” Smaller fits into,



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well, smaller spaces, but all she needs is something harder to see and all I need is something even more difficult to find in my purse. So how do we deal with smaller? Well, we've lost things . . . several times AND we search until we find something bigger and buy that. In addition, I label (with nail polish, of course) as much as I can: remote control features, the television, the microwave, and myriad chargers. I also find that as our tech toys get smaller, I tend to ruin them by water: dropping one in my sink while washing my face (don't ask where it fell from), leaving one on the coffee table and spilling a Tab on it, leaving it outside to get rained on, and so on. Is water good for them? Turns out, no.

- Just because it's easier to reach me—technologically speaking—it doesn't mean my mother will use these new technologies in the ways intended. Access 24/7 means total emergency access for me, but my friends are still talking about me getting a phone call from my mother in Boston asking—in an irritated tone of voice with a nice smattering of curse words—where her shampoo was. And that's not all—many have been the times I have answered a ringing cell phone during an important early morning meeting, to the question “have you fed the dog?” So my conversation goes something like this in a loud whisper “What?” “Yes.” (or “No.”) “Bye.”
- Tracking people (okay, her) through modern-day technological processes does NOT impress her. She isn't amused when I am gone (work, traveling) and she shops off the television and within seconds, I have received an e-mail notifying “her” (me in e-mail disguise) of what was ordered and when it's coming in.
- Caller ID—a godsend to me—irritates her (and her friends I might add) as I will often answer the phone with a greeting specific to the person calling. My mother refuses to behave accordingly; that is, I will pick up a ringing phone, see who it is, and hand it to her saying, “it's X.” She still answers it acting genuinely surprised to hear the voice of the caller.
- Tech target marketing does not make her happy. After ordering dog medicine under her name online, I will receive e-mails, as well as print advertising sent by snail mail that says “Ms. Todaro! Time to order Casey's dog medicine!”
- When the new iPhone Web site premiered with the three user examples, I sat her down to review the advertising. She viewed one simulation of the couple at the coffee table accessing content *on* the coffee table. I could see the wheels turning as she watched all three and then gave me a look like, “Why would anyone want to do that?”
- Other modern/techie things not to be trifled with (well, maybe one):
 - An identifier microchip inserted in our dog (we won't be doing that).

- An automobile that converses with us (we're going to buy that in our next vehicle).
- Banking online (not to be trusted).
- Appliances that work independently/can be programmed (not going to happen).
- Appliances that coexist, such as the refrigerator with the television in the door (we don't even have an automatic icemaker . . . what do you think).

And finally, explaining the twenty-first-century tool the “search engine” was relatively easy, but keeping up with what search engines do is almost impossible for everyone. After Google “from Pluto” as I call it, premiered, I—as I often do with technology—wondered “why?” Other than identifying a hangout for “evildoers everywhere” for bombings or . . . pizza delivery . . . why DO we have Google from Pluto? I deliberately did not show the capability to my mother to avoid the questions that accurately zeroed in on privacy and “Why do we need this?” issues.

I was caught off guard, however, when my stepson came over to show us some of his most recent work on the Web, and while showing my mother, he decided to show her “Google from Pluto.” Where we went wrong (in a moment we won't soon forget) was using our home address as the “target.” We were set back at least a decade in tech acceptance as all of the tech hatred, anxiety, criticism, angst, and skepticism, came to a head when the Google window narrowed down and focused in on what shall always be a pivotal moment when my mother—looking horrified—looked on as the Earth and then our house rushed up to greet her and she squinted and leaning toward the screen asked “OMG is that MY garbage can?” And it was.

So what does this mean for our workplaces? We need to ask ourselves the following questions.

- Do we all have to know everything? That is, does every staff person have to be knowledgeable about and skilled in (don't forget enthusiastic about) everything new? I don't think so, but the major problem we have is what are the basic, advanced, and unique competencies required and then preferred of all staff, different staff levels, and unique staff responsibilities?
- Where do we draw the line in finding applications for new technology and then applying everything new?
- How DO we pick and choose what we will become familiar with, what we will have experience with and education in, and what we will embrace?
- How are we handling staff members who are not stepping up to embrace “all that is new?” Are we finding answers? A place for them?
- Are we discriminating against those who don't embrace new technologies?

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- Are we addressing the "attitude" competencies enough? At all? Or are we just focusing on knowledge, skills, and abilities?
- Are managers expecting more of employees than they are of themselves? If so, is that acceptable? Do managers have to know all that their employees know?

My guess is at every juncture of our professional history managers have struggled with these same questions. When we got the first high-speed microfilm readers, was everyone supportive? Our first floppy data disk from our

citation-only "database" came and went relatively quickly. Did we angst over needing to install other drives? When we went from 5.25 to 3.5? Or towers? Or LANs? Why are our questions harder now than they were then?

There is small comfort, however, in knowing that "we've always had these or similar questions" when we are struggling to address so many questions at one time now. As we narrow in and focus down and as the world of work comes rushing up to meet us, we must—at the very least—recognize that it is our garbage can after all.