

# Hell's Bells

*A new service offers a politically correct guide for the telephone-impaired*

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

HELLO. You have reached Teletiquette, answering all your telephone-etiquette questions. If you have a question about telephone etiquette in a professional setting, please press 1; for personal etiquette questions, please press 2; for extremely personal etiquette questions, please press 3, so we can all hear them. A \$3 charge will appear on your phone bill, more for exceptionally good answers. Thank you, and press your number now.

*Yo, are you for real?*

Of course! Let's face it, the modern telephone is a problem. Remember when the phone used to sit quietly on the telephone table, all homely and black, with its inverted Mickey Mouse ears and its rotary dial, and heavy as a brick? That old phone knew its place, and it stayed put. Today's phones, goodness. They've slimmed down, added a zillion functions (most of them unworkable), wriggled free of the wall jack and plugged themselves in to us. All across America, people are jabbering into handsets in backyards and, increasingly, on street corners. Yachtsmen go below to feed their on-board fax machines. Drivers zip along the nation's highways with a phone in their ear. Air travelers stay in touch with the

home office from a flying pay phone. Who ever would have thought so many Americans would spend so much time talking to people they can't see?

Naturally, modern-day telephone communication is not without its difficulties, and Teletiquette can help. Many distressed telephone users are already put off by the social complications of telephoning—knowing how late it is okay to call on weeknights, for instance, or how to respond without obscenities to telemarketers who ring up during dinner, or whether it is really necessary to say “No, I was just getting up” when someone asks if his call at seven o'clock on Sunday morning has awakened you. And our surveys show that these uncertainties have only increased with all the new telephonic technology currently available—car phones, cordless phones, beepers, answering machines, voice mail, call waiting, etc., etc. Tiny, go-anywhere pocket phones are beginning to plague crowded downtown streets. Caller I.D.—which reveals the phone number of the caller to the callee—is widely available, and *blockable* caller I.D. is sure to follow. And we have reports that the audio-plus-video Picturephone is finally on its way to market (after a brief appearance in the early Sixties), with significant implications for the phone-sex business, to say the least. But all this new technology has major social consequences, and, for a modest fee, Teletiquette wants to help America cope with them.

*Hi, there. Listen, I'm a screenwriter, and I do my most creative work in the strangest places, so my portable fax machine is absolutely key. But here's my problem. I find I get some really powerful movie concepts when Luigi is trimming my cuticles down at the salon. But would you believe the place has only one phone jack? So what happens when everybody in the salon needs to fax pronto? Now, I know you're going to say "First come, first served." But I was just trying to dash off one single, incredible sentence to my agent, and there was this b-i-t-c-h hogging the jack with a whole frigging screenplay. Is it all right to ask someone like that to pull out for a second?*

This is simply a variant on the old public-library Xerox principle: Someone else is copying a hundred pages, you want to copy one; can you butt in? Sure, if you can get the person ahead of you in line to agree. If Ms. Blabfax (continued on page 186)



## first person

(continued from page 184) resists, try offering her a fax-jack screen credit.

Oh, hello. I'm one of those new agers who avoid commuting to a stifling work environment by using a lot of telecommunications technology—fax, beeper, car phone, modem—to work in the comfort of my home. My problem is that, since I'm "plugged in" around the clock, I'm having trouble maintaining normal working hours. You'd be amazed how late colleagues feel free to call me with business problems. Is there any polite way to get them to lay off?

Unfortunately, if you have a phone, you

tion, you have no choice but to regard your telephone conversations as public statements. So speak right up as though you were addressing a press conference. When your boyfriend says he loves you, say "I'm sorry, Freddy. I can't talk about that now." It will be disappointing to Freddy, sure, but take heart. Once you reduce the entertainment value of your telephone conversations, eavesdroppers will tune out, and you might be able to be more amorous with Freddy at a later date. In the meantime, your stodgy bureaucratic manner should reduce the number and duration of your calls, allowing you to leave work early and

you'll probably find that you get a little more mannerly, and your Boston associate a little less so. This shift is especially marked when there is a colorful personality on the line. We have a saying around the office: "When Texans call, even Rhode Islanders drawl." The short of it is that when you phone Boston from L.A., neither you nor the callee will be completely yourself. But that's all part of having a conversation.

*After work, I like to slip into a nice warm bath and cozy up to the phone, you know? I find it a really relaxing way to catch up with my friends. But as a single girl, I'm a little shy*

### *It's okay to place calls from the tub, but you might want to hold off on getting a Picturephone.*

can be called. And the problem is only going to get worse as all phones go cellular: If they can travel with us, we can never be free of them. But for now, just because you work at home, it doesn't mean that you're always at work when you are home. Install a separate line in your house for work-related calls, and have an answering machine pick up after six saying the office is closed for the night. And, for God's sake, turn off the beeper after hours or you are inviting trouble.

Hello, Teletiquette?

Yes. Could you speak up a little, please?

Well, that's my problem. I don't like to speak too loudly because, you see, I work in a large office here, and everybody always listens in on my conversations.

And if you wanted everyone to know what you were saying, you'd make it a conference call.

If I knew which buttons to press. They told me, but I kinda forgot. So I try to keep it down, but, like, just this morning, when I was hanging up with my boyfriend and he told me he loved me? Obviously, I wasn't going to blurt out 'I love you too' right there in front of everyone. So I just kinda mumbled 'Er, yeah, um, me too,' like I wasn't saying anything. And right away, all around me, everybody started smiling. I was so embarrassed! How can I get people to mind their own business?

Unfortunately, anything you say is only going to make them nosier. It's probably inevitable that they listen in, but one would hope they'd have the good grace at least to pretend they aren't hanging on every word you say. It will be nice in the future when you can nip into the ladies' room with your private pocket phone for personal calls, but for now, given the situa-

tion, you have no choice but to regard your telephone conversations as public statements. So speak right up as though you were addressing a press conference. When your boyfriend says he loves you, say "I'm sorry, Freddy. I can't talk about that now." It will be disappointing to Freddy, sure, but take heart. Once you reduce the entertainment value of your telephone conversations, eavesdroppers will tune out, and you might be able to be more amorous with Freddy at a later date. In the meantime, your stodgy bureaucratic manner should reduce the number and duration of your calls, allowing you to leave work early and

catch up with friends and relations from your home phone.

*I have a friend who is always playing games with me on the phone. Like, he'll call up and say he's John D. MacArthur giving me a "genius award" or Kitty Kelley's research assistant working on a biography of my boss. It's never funny, but when I get mad at him, he only laughs, as if that's the best part of the joke. Any suggestions?*

If he is going to pretend that he's someone you don't know, you might as well play along. Hang up on him, just as you would on any crank caller.

*Hey. I live in L.A., and I gotta make a business call to this guy in Boston. You know how Boston is, with all its manners and everything. What I want to know is, if I am calling him, does that mean it's, like, my call, and we can, like, relax on the phone? Or do I have to act uptight, like they are in the East?*

We get this question a lot. People used to think that making a call was like paying a call—physically visiting someone at his house. In that case, the person who placed the call was the guest, and the person who received the call was the host. And the guest would try to accommodate himself to the host's style. You don't put your feet up on Chippendale furniture, at least not until your host does it first. But now that long-distance calls are so common, people don't have the sense of visiting anymore. Now telephone calls take place in a middle ground that is a little bit like Novosibirsk—a place without history or any prevailing social order. The social rules are defined on the spot by the individual participants. But people tend to accommodate each other. So when you call Boston,

about letting on to guys that I'm calling from my tub. So with guys, I always lie there dead still to keep from splashing. But that gets uncomfortable as the water cools down. Am I being silly?

Yes, totally. Listen, if you're a female between the ages of 18 and 36, guys are going to be picturing you naked and wet whether you're in the bathtub or not. Lie back and splash away. But you might want to hold off on your Picturephone order—unless, of course, you're going to call us here at Teletiquette again.

*I had call waiting installed because I was taking so much flak from friends who kept getting a busy signal. Now these same friends are pissed because I keep putting them on hold while I check on my other line. Maybe I should just ignore the little beeps, but I get so curious. So tell me: Should I keep call waiting or not?*

Call waiting has presented us with one of the great dilemmas of our time. To some, it's a godsend; to others, it's an invitation to cut in line. Either way, it has changed the basic rules of telephoning. It is now the telephone owner's responsibility to keep an open line for all callers, just as it has become his obligation to have an answering machine so no ring goes unanswered. It's an extension of the telephone's inherent open-door policy, whereby anyone can enter your house without knocking just by dialing your number. The telephone company could ease your call-waiting dilemma by providing the means, now available in only a few telephone exchanges, for users to turn this "convenience" off when they don't want to be interrupted. Until then, we recommend call waiting only for professional use.

*And if I do keep it at home? Any pointers on*

## first person

*handling two calls at once?*

If you must have call waiting at home, follow these simple rules. (1) Always curse audibly when you are beeped for the second call, no matter how glad you might be to have a good excuse to break away from the first. (2) Keep the interruptions extremely brief. (3) If you end up bumping the first call for the second, make it clear to the party of the first part that you are jumping only because the second call is an absolute emergency. (4) If the call you are moving to is not an emergency and you are taking it anyway, pretend it is. Otherwise you're

### *At Teletiquette, we have been recommending phone sex for some time as the only truly safe sex.*

committing a gruesome social crime, the blatant snubbing of one friend for another.

*You know how it is when you talk on the phone to somebody you've never met—you kind of imagine how they look? There was something so wonderful about this one girl's voice, I figured she was absolutely gorgeous. But I finally met her a couple of weeks ago and, well . . . she isn't. My problem is that my fantasy image of her keeps coming back every time she calls, and I can't shake it.*

Why try? Don't meet her again. Keep talking to her on the phone.

*I finally broke down and got an answering machine. What message should I use?*

Whatever you do, don't try to be clever. One sexy girl of our acquaintance purred "You know what to do." That was pretty good, but it was pretty good exactly once. And another fellow managed to get G. Gordon Liddy to tell callers to leave a message or he, G. Gordon, would break their legs. That was truly startling once, and mildly amusing two or three times thereafter. Others do Bogart and Cagney and Richard Nixon muttering about tapes. No, no, no. Do the world a favor and stick to the point: "Please leave a message after the beep."

*My husband is in sales, and he's on the road a lot. He really likes it when I talk dirty to him on his car phone, especially after a tough day. We have this whole routine in which I tell him exactly what I'm going to do to him when he gets home—tie him to the bedposts, rub him all over with almond-scented massage oil, feed him crème fraîche off my nipples. That kind of thing. It may sound corny, but I can tell by the way his breathing speeds up that he is really into it. Normally, I wouldn't mind obliging*

*him, but it makes me nervous if he's in the car. I'm afraid he's going to drive off the road or something.*

At Teletiquette, we have been recommending phone sex for some time as the only truly safe sex, but you raise an important point. Whatever you are saying to your husband, you'll be wise to key your remarks to the speed of his car, as determined by its whoosh. The faster he goes, the slower you go, if you know what I mean. And conversely, the slower he goes, the faster you go. This way, you'll keep him on ice when he's in the passing lane of the

superhighway but very happy when he is stalled in traffic.

*I'm going to be traveling a lot on business for the next few months, and I'm thinking of continuing my analysis by telephone. The question is, How will I know if my doctor is really listening?*

How do you know he's listening now? Your eyes are supposed to be on the ceiling. No, if your doctor is any good, he will give you the kind of verbal encouragement—the mm-hms and uh-huhs and the occasional full-blown "yes"—that you need to assure yourself that, contrary to your worst fears, he is indeed paying complete and adoring attention to your every word. We should add that it is not only psychiatrists who are obligated to give this kind of guttural feedback. Everyone should. There is no one so disturbing as the person who listens in total, icy silence as you pour out your soul to him over the phone.

*I'm plagued by wrong numbers. How should I handle them?*

Like any transgression: Forgive and forget, unless the same bozo does it over and over. Then you might try the Danny DeVito line from *Ruthless People*, when some chucklehead called to ask if "Debbie" was there. "Yeah, Debbie's here," DeVito replied, his eyes brightening. "Debbie can't talk right now—my dick is in her mouth."

*Why do people in New York City say "Call me" when they part, whereas people everywhere else in the country say "I'll call you"?*

For status reasons, primarily. It's much more impressive to be called than to call. After all, anybody can call. But not everybody can be called. Plus, New Yorkers know they won't call, but this way, they

shift responsibility for lying over to their friends.

*If you have an answering machine, are you obliged to call strangers back, just because they have left a message asking you to?*

Only if you say you will in your outgoing message. For this reason, it is not recommended that you do so. As with call waiting, the answering machine's chief consequence has been the transfer of obligation for completing the call from the caller to the callee. That's not really fair, is it? If they want to call you, let them call you.

They shouldn't expect you to call them—unless, of course, by some chance you actually do want to speak to them.

*I'm one guy with an unusual problem. I work as a customer rep, and I happen to have a fairly high voice. People call me "miss" and "ma'am" a lot on the phone. It's happened so much that it doesn't bother me anymore, but people always get so embarrassed when I tell them my name and they realize I'm male that I feel bad for them. Any ideas on what to do?*

Assuming you're not interested in a sex change, vocal surgery or a new job, we recommend you change your professional name to Sidney. That way, people who think you are female can continue to do so, and people who realize you are male won't be unduly distressed.

*What's the best way to wind up a telephone call? Mine seem to drag on and on. In person, I can check my watch, tap my foot, look impatient. What can I do on the phone?*

The oldest trick in the telephone book is to repeat the crux of the call. "So we'll meet at my office in the hospital psychiatric ward as soon as the ambulance can bring you here?" If that doesn't work, add an emphatic "Okay?" If that doesn't work, say "I really have to go now." If that doesn't work, say something, anything, and while you are talking, press your finger down on the hang-up button. No one, not even the most paranoid schizophrenic, would ever think that you'd hang up on yourself. Then leave the phone off the hook while your loony-tunes phone mate tries to call to find out what happened. *Et voilà.* You are off the phone. •

*John Sedgwick wrote about the pleasures of Maine's Northeast Harbor, in September.*