

Opinion

Cell Phone Ruminations: Do You Have Them, Too?

I admit that I was a little slow to get my first cell phone, in large part because I wanted to hold on to those moments of peace when I simply could not be contacted. Well, I gave in as soon as I realized that I could exchange one for my hated beeper, which always seemed to go off when I couldn't get to a phone. I thought about turning the cell phone off when I wanted solitude, but was overcome by guilt that if I owned a cell phone, others who depended on me knew it, so I was duty bound to keep it on, unless I was in a concert or aloft in an airplane. My wife tells me that I talk too loudly into the cell phone, but the microphone is halfway up my cheek, and there is no audio feedback in my ear the way there is on a landline phone, so how am I supposed to know how loud is loud enough?

I am not the only one with a cell-yell problem. At the airport I am treated to conversations I would rather not hear, by people who talk much more than they listen. Every time an airplane passes by, they talk louder still, never quite returning to the baseline volume. Those who use hands-free headsets seem to yell just as much as those who cradle their phone, but they have two hands free for gesticulation. When they look anywhere in my direction, I'd swear they are talking to me, too late discovering their ear appendage.

There is some gender specificity to this. The men like to tilt their head back and talk to the sky while sprawling

expansively in their molded plastic chairs, while the women tend to flex their necks and talk down into their lap or purse. Both genders, though, seem to like to walk aimlessly while talking, suddenly stopping and reversing direction on the airport concourse like a toddler separated from Mom. These sudden stops require evasive maneuvers from travelers actually trying to get someplace, and the occasional collision is inevitable. We ought to require turn signals and backup lights on them.

Of course, not everyone on a cell phone is boisterous and obnoxious. It used to be that trench-coated people lurking in corners or dark alleys were flashers, but now they are likely cell phone users. Restaurants and hotels have to be a lot more careful where they allow messy accumulations of furniture, garbage or linen because a cell phone user will be found amongst it sooner or later. Architects should consider adding phone booths (without landline phones in them) to public spaces, so that the public would not be exposed to second-hand phone as is currently the case.

The Wall Street Journal of Oct. 23, 2006, reported a survey of 4,581 cell phone users, finding "satisfactory" ratings in only 59 percent for sound quality, 58 percent for coverage of their service provider and 54 percent for call dependability. If we had patient satisfaction ratings like that, we'd have been out of business long ago. Apparently, people

are willing to put up with a lot in order to stay connected, to feel less alone or to check their e-mail messages in elevators.

Which brings me to my Blackberry. I made the switch from a pure cell phone because there are times when I can't access high-speed connectivity any other way. But sometimes my hand gets tired while I'm talking on the phone, and I haven't yet mastered how to regrasp the device without inadvertently pressing one of its 36 buttons or keys, thus disconnecting the call.

I know I have to avoid upgrading to the new model with the built-in camera, because I will just get a lot of close-up pictures of my ear.



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