Peace in our time

Booth manners revisited. Or how to behave in small spaces.

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Peaceful coexistence is the purpose of much human endeavour; indeed many of us ply our trade for organizations that invest effort and resources in keeping this fractious world on an even keel, and there are international treaties that enjoin countries not to rub their neighbours up the wrong way by having the music on too loud.

We have all heard the saying think global act local; it is time to take this message to heart. AIIC has published extensively on how an interpreter is to behave with clients, consultant interpreters and sarcastic waiters. The association must now turn its mind to peace within the booth.

Within living memory an AIIC working group produced guidelines on booth manners. They included wise counsel such as do not light a bonfire in the booth however cold, keep all pets at home (boa constrictors and tarantulas were a particular beef) and do your bagpipe practice somewhere where nobody will notice – say the chief interpreter’s office.

With a finger to the ground and an ear on the pulse, I have concluded that the committee needs to reconvene to draw up further guidance on peaceful co-existence. There follows a short list of some of the transgressions the grapevine dropped on my doorstep.

Before starting it is only fair to say that there are mitigating circumstances for our wayward behaviour: the working environment has shredded our nerves. Consider the cramped condition of the booths, the turbo-gabbling of speakers forced to cram five-day meetings into two – plus the need to check the children’s homework and coach the man in your life on how to shop (buy toilet paper, treasure, not fillet steak).

Research findings

The thermal thug: you are sitting comfortably in your debonair non-crease jacket and soup-proof tie, or comfortable skirt and top. Your colleague arrives, complains it’s too hot or too cold and starts fiddling with the thermostat. When he/she leaves you surreptitiously put the heat back down to a balmy 25°, but – as sure as eggs is eggs – your colleague will notice once he’s back in the booth and push it up again. And make his teeth chatter to hammer the point home.

Acoustic attacker: noise is simply part of modern life, what with machines, radios, CD players, children and a profusion of escaped parrots. The acoustic attacker sighs, rustles the newspaper, clanks his spoon on his cup, rummages in her handbag, sighs a bit more and generally creates a wall of sound that can put the best of us off our stroke. Please relax, esteemed colleague – I know you’re there; we swapped a recipe for cheese on toast but 20 short minutes ago.
Exuberant subcategories of noise

Manic muncher: not only do delegates hear you through their headphones, but they can also see you doing it and we all look gormless when we chew. There are places called canteens or restaurants where, for a small consideration, you will be given a table, a knife and fork and food. This is the place for chewing.

The same holds good for drinks in the booth; please sip daintily and keep slurping to after hours. Clearly we all need a good slurp once in a while – many consider it vital in a globalized world – but there’s a time and a place.

Scribbling scratcher: computers have got quieter (the mouse no longer squeaks for instance) but there is something slightly off-putting about a person with whom you’re sharing body-space furiously tapping away and peering in wonderment at her lost battleship. The thing is that she is no longer a colleague, but a virtual presence. Rather than marshalling lists of vocabulary, she is miles away, reading the news or writing erotic emails in iambic pentameter.

Problems lying in wait

Olfactory overkill: we have all suffered from sharing a confined space with someone who has bathed in Nuit de Schaerbeek. I think we men have to come clean (no pun intended) and admit that we sometimes overdo it with the aftershave. I’ll let you into a little secret: we were all once small and smelly boys (it goes with the turf), so there is within us an unspoken fear that we are still the niffy nine-year-old. Hence the industrial quantities of Eau de Hauptbahnhof.

Bacterial bully: you know the scene. It’s winter and your booth mate turns up to work with streaming eyes and runny nose and announces in a voice of valiant martyrdom that he has struggled to work despite running a fever. Now you make a sympathetic noise, but deep down you know that he really should be at home in bed rather than munificently sharing of his germs with you for the next 7 hours. Of course struggling into work bathes us in heroic light, but also smothers our colleagues in our infection. Not a good idea. Those booths are very small and microbes love leaping around.

Lighting larrikin: some people need the overhead light to see whilst others like the intimacy of the task lamps. This can be the beginning of a happy day where it looks as if you are trying to send messages to allies outside the building. To paint the picture: your booth mate is struggling with a non-native speaker who substitutes speed for clarity and has now got to the recent economic statistics for Upper Angustia. This is not the moment to turn off your colleague’s light because your probiotic yoga teacher told you to relax in a darkened room.

Mobile mugger: to be fair most colleagues switch off their mobile when working but we all sometimes forget, in which case you are kindly asked not to have a full decibel version of Bat out of Hell as your ring tone.

Senseless snapper: nowadays we all possess a pocket size camera that takes great pictures. The little marvels are practically idiot proof, which is probably why you see so many of them. It’s only human to be tickled pink to be working at the Geopathic Stress Summit and to want to take pictures that immortalize your moment of glory, but a camera click is like a gunshot to a person in deep concentration, and one could miss an important word like “not” as in “cannot” or “will not”, causing all sorts of intercontinental ructions. Please keep your deft camerawork to the break.

The glowering gawper: there is a final piece of unnerving behaviour that seems to be on the wane, but it gets a mention for reasons of completeness and historical accuracy. If you’re the target of an unflinching stare you start to wonder: did I fluff the delegate of Upper Amnesia, is my tie crooked,
are my cuffs grubby, my voice croaky, or did he like my turn of phrase, is he transported by my 
metaphors – should I ask her for a drink after work. None of us are immune to peer pressure.

Please don’t think my intention is negative – here are some handy hints for harmony and some easy 
steps to exoneration and forgiveness:

- Offer to do the first half hour then run to the cafeteria to bring back an espresso ristretto for 
your booth mate.
- Share your latest copy of Hola with the article of the Duchess’ wedding.
- Find the speech currently being read at breakneck speed in a quaint accent and hand it over 
promptly, even during your half hour off.
- Adopt a tone of respect and curtsy when the senior colleague leaves the booth.

It’s not a lot to ask.

[1] In this article she = he and he = she. It is equal opportunity ribbing.

Recommended citation format:

<https://aiic.net/p/6867>.