

# Welcome to the Barnyard, or Thoughts on Etiquette in Professional Venues

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Let me start by saying first, that I've witnessed a rash of unprofessional conduct lately and second, that I don't suffer such things quietly. During 2005, I have had an extraordinarily high number of professional experiences that were, to put it mildly, aggravating beyond belief. To give a feel for what's eating at me, I'll describe a couple of them, and then get to the heart of the matter – namely, the need for some guidance on professional etiquette.

## *Experience #1: Why'd They Come, Anyway?*

Last summer I gave a workshop, gratis, at a company with a longstanding history of SAS usage and expertise. Shortly into the presentation, two people in the audience began a hushed conversation punctuated with giggles, then started Instant Messaging, opening what looked like a game, and Web surfing. Had one of them suddenly jumped up, pumping his fist, and shouting “Hah, Zorgon, I've finally trapped you!” I would not have been surprised – and it would have been only slightly more distracting.

These cretins interrupted their activity occasionally, but only to ask me questions that would not have been necessary if they were paying attention in the first place.

## *Experience #2: Remember Me? I'm the One Who Helped You. Hello. Hello ...?*

I often reply to questions on SAS-L and SUG-L directly to the poster rather than to the list, feeling that these personal replies can be made more quickly and more informally than those to the group as a whole.

Recently someone had a question about automating macro documentation. She was in luck, because that was the topic of an article I was writing for the RTSUG newsletter. I sent her a ZIP file with a draft version of the article, the macro that it discussed, and sample programs to play with. The email didn't bounce.

A week later I had received no reply. Curious, I sent her an email, asking if she had any comments on the macro or the article. It's now months later, and still not a peep. This person is someone who will not receive my help in the future.

## *Experience #3: The Perfect Conference Storm*

I was in the audience at a recent conference, gradually realizing that the speaker was poorly prepared, monotonous, and strayed off-topic. Since I was hoping to have better luck with the next presenter, I stayed, and was treated to quite a show when the speaker solicited questions.

One of the questions came from someone whose expertise clearly exceeded that of the speaker. Rather than discuss an inaccurate part of the presentation “off line” in private conversation, the audience member went into a point-by-point list of what he would have done differently.

It was a Perfect Storm. The speaker was young and inexperienced, clearly not prepared to defend himself. The questioner was as rude as he was correct. And the session coordinator didn't have the good sense to hustle everyone along and declare the session over. It could have been the “before” scenario in a Running Your Conference training video. It was just plain embarrassing for everyone involved – or should have been.

**What's Happening?** Over my 30 years of programming and involvement in professional forums, of course, I've seen a little of this discourteous behavior. It was notable, but infrequent enough to ignore. Recently, however, it almost seems to be modal, and this disturbs me.

My discomfort is rooted in thinking that by conducting ourselves poorly in these non-programming venues, we are abusing a privilege and squandering an opportunity. We are privileged to be able to make our living as programmers and analysts. The financial compensation is good, the work is challenging, and “so many toys, so little time” aptly describes most of our working days. Outside the scope of the day-to-

day, activities such as conferences and electronic media present an opportunity to learn more about our craft and develop a profile in the profession.

Some of the responsibilities that come with these privileges and opportunities are obvious. They are sometimes laid out via legal and corporate guidances – how to interact with coworkers, how to structure programs, data formatting, documentation requirements, and the like. A lot of the rest seems to rely on behavior and comity that can only come from what a colleague described as “not being brought up in a barnyard.”

**Scope.** I’d like to focus here on etiquette in professional venues: attending conferences, participating in list servers, and using email. These are activities we take for granted, and in doing so we often seem to let our manners, as well as our hair, down. I’ll organize the discussion by venue, and try to keep ranting to a cathartic minimum.

I’ve tried to phrase everything in positive terms (“Stay awake,” for example, rather than “Don’t disturb the room by having your head thump down on the table”). Keep in mind that *everything* you read is based on my personal experience, covering the range of good to bad to downright ugly. Keep in mind, too, that some of what’s discussed is simply “nice to have,” and would not be terribly egregious if not taken to heart. That is, no one should fault you for a vague subject line in an email.

## Venue 1: Conferences

A professional conference is unequalled as an opportunity to acquire job skills and interact with colleagues. It’s out of the ordinary, day-to-day routine, and as such presents special challenges. This section presents suggestions for different conference settings and roles.

### Presentations

The only reason to *sit* in a room where someone is speaking is to hear what the speaker has to say and, hopefully, to learn something. The only reason to *speak* to the people in the room is to communicate your knowledge and ideas effectively. With that in mind:

	<u>Audience</u>	<u>Speaker</u>
<b>Before</b>	<b>Be prepared.</b> Read the abstract so you know what the talk is about. <b>Remove distractions.</b> Turn off, or at least mute, anything electronic. <b>Keep an open mind.</b> Even if part of the talk covers familiar ground, it’s a good bet that the material could be presented in such a way that you gain a fresh perspective.	<b>Be prepared.</b> Ensure that AV is working correctly and handouts are distributed. <b>Set ground rules.</b> Say when you’d like to take questions (during and/or after the talk). <b>Identify scope.</b> Make it clear if the presentation won’t exactly match the abstract.
<b>During</b>	<b>Stay awake.</b> Either that, or sleep without slumping in your chair. <b>Leave discreetly.</b> If you must leave early, do so quietly and quickly. If you know you’ll leave early, sit in the back of the room. <b>Focus.</b> Don’t chat, eat, IM your friends, read the newspaper, etc.	<b>Read the audience.</b> Alter your pace if everyone seems lost. <b>Be engaging.</b> Don’t read your paper verbatim. Converse, don’t lecture. <b>Don’t patronize.</b> Remember that your expertise is the result of accrual, not hard-wiring. <b>Give contact information.</b>
<b>After</b>	<b>Stay on track.</b> Ask questions related to the talk. <b>Ask questions clearly.</b> Get to the point quickly, and speak clearly.	<b>Reply to the entire room.</b> Ensure that everyone hears the question. Repeat and rephrase it before responding. <b>Admit ignorance.</b> If you don’t know the answer, admit ignorance and go to the next

## Audience

**Accept “non-omnipotence”** The speaker may not know the answer. Don’t pursue or badger.

**Follow up.** Follow up with email.

## Speaker

question.

**Follow up.** Be sure to follow up as needed with email replies to questions posed immediately after the talk as well as communication after the conference.

## Volunteers

Conference volunteers provide the labor and ideas that make for a successful conference. It’s a special and valued role, and it requires extra effort on the part of the person offering his/her time.

**Keep in touch.** Contact your coordinator before the conference. Let the coordinator know when you’ll arrive at the conference, and where you’ll be staying. Provide a cell phone number if appropriate.

**Show up.** Start your assignment at the time and place agreed upon by you and the volunteer coordinator. To reduce the coordinator’s stress level, try to show up early.

**Get clarification.** Don’t be afraid to ask questions if your instructions are not clear.

**Be a graceful no-show.** If you can’t be there, let the coordinator know ahead of time.

## Everyone

**It’s Work, Sort Of.** A conference is a chance to interact with your peers and to be exposed to new ideas. Although it isn’t work *per se*, remember that you are wearing a badge with your name and company on display. Even though the company is not tangibly present, it is there in spirit.

**“Booze It and Lose It?”** As you head to the afternoon mixer, try to objectively assess how your behavior changes after having a drink, or two, or more. It’s ok to relax somewhat – that’s what these events are for – but don’t get so relaxed that you later can’t remember your slurred words as you fell into the punch bowl.

**Dress appropriately.** You want to be remembered as “that interesting person from company x” rather than “the junior hooker” or “the extra from Revenge of the Nerds.”

## Venue 2: List Servers

To use SAS parlance, a list server is a “one-to-many merge.” A message to a heavily-subscribed list with broad appeal is distributed around the world. This means someone posting or replying may be talking to a few people he/she knows, but is more likely communicating with complete strangers. In other words, it’s a good time to exercise judgment and a little restraint.

## Everyone

**Format for Usability.** Plain text messages with relatively narrow widths (70 characters, max) facilitate cut-and-paste for people who want to run sample code.

**Use Accurate Subjects.** The subject of the message should clearly and succinctly convey its content. This is no different than the phrasing of a paper’s title, and is just as important. “Aargh! Pls help” is cute, but cute has a short shelf life.

**Remember the SAS Food Chain.** In the SAS world, as in the world at large, remember that there will always be people of greater and lesser ability than you. Gratefully learn from the former and humbly pass your wisdom along to the latter.

**Don’t Be Anonymous.** Spider Man needs a secret identity, but you probably don’t. Unless there is a truly compelling reason to protect your identity, let people know who you are. Among other things, anonymity means that the poster could mingle at conferences, him knowing fellow posters, they being unaware of his online persona. This isn’t necessarily harmful, but it *is* a bit creepy.

**Realize That It’s Permanent.** Chose your words carefully, because your postings aren’t going away. Lists are archived. Your keen insights will be preserved, along with your impetuous, hammer-headed rants. List servers impartially preseve the entire spectrum of virtual behavior.

## Posters

**Demonstrate Effort.** Show that you've tried to solve the problem. Saying "here's my problem, here's my code, here's my defective output, help!" inspires more positive responses than "here's my problem, someone please solve it for me." Provide context, programs, and sample data in the program or via URLs.

**In the Absence of Effort, Admit Cluelessness.** If you really don't have any idea how to solve or even phrase your problem, say so, and say it directly.

**Give Specifics.** Fully describe the problem: identify the OS, SAS version you are using, sort order of data, and other relevant details.

**Follow Up.** Thank people when your problem is solved. This not only shows you have manners, but also gives some closure to the topic. If you were provided with a range of solutions, show the code or the approach you used and why you used it. If you thank people individually, include the names of both public and private contributors (unless they request anonymity).

## Repliers

**Quote Sparingly.** Reply postings should provide context, just as the original and subsequent postings did. Taking snippets from earlier messages is valuable, but inserting the entire stream of correspondence is likely overkill and counterproductive.

**Don't belittle.** Play nice, and remember where you came from. Remember that even Jim Goodnight was once a SAS coding newbie.

**Don't flame.** Express your opinion, but remember that this is programming, not religion. The best postings are those that are thoughtful, persuasive, and respectful (however grudgingly) of other points of view.

**Be sensitive to language issues.** Posting when English isn't your native language can be daunting. Make a special effort to glean the content from non-English speakers. Also, resist the urge, powerful though it may be at times, to chuckle at the unintended humor of a badly-worded passage. If you *must* chuckle, do so in the privacy of your own cube.

**Stay on topic.** If your reply goes off-topic, indicate it clearly. A useful way to do this is to change the subject of the email while keeping the original topic (e.g., "SQL efficiency (was: How to merge a 4gb file?)").

**State Your Assumptions.** Let readers know the assumptions of your solution (OS, SAS version, dataset sort order, *et al.*). This is especially important if your assumptions are different than those of the original poster.

**Know the "Reply To" Setting.** The tone of a personal reply often differs from a reply to the entire list. Be sure you know how the list server is configured. This can be especially problematic (and embarrassing) if you are subscribed to multiple lists with different default settings.

## Venue 3: Email

If a server environment is the equivalent of a one-to-many join, email correspondence is one-to-one. While many of the suggestions for list server conduct are valid here as well, there are some key differences. Notably, because there's a single recipient, you are speaking directly to them, and it becomes more personal. Your tone can adjust to the recipient. If you know your correspondent, you can safely personalize your message. Even if you are not acquainted, you can focus your comments more than when posting to a list.

**Consider Timing.** Email *transmission* is immediate, but the *response* doesn't have to be. If you really, really need a quick reply, say so, but even then, don't hold your breath. If there is no "reply by" language, it's probably OK for others to wait a couple of days before replying.

**Reply to everything.** If replying to the list server could be seen as *helpful*, replying to a personal email is *essential*. There is *nothing* that pushes my buttons more vigorously than when I send a program or sug-

gestion to someone who I *know* needs help, and then receive neither a bounce or a reply. Respond, even if it's a simple one-liner saying "yes, I got your suggestion/idea/code/... Thanks."

**Disagree politely.** There's no rule that says you have to agree with everyone, but you *do* have to make the effort to frame your disagreement in a civil manner. Since a private email is the equivalent of one-on-one conversation (compared to a list, which is like talking to a room), responses should be even more carefully worded. "\$%&\*ing meathead" is to the point and may be therapeutic, but it is also the fuel that burns professional and social bridges. In the long run, you'll be respected more for considered, thoughtful opinions than catchy, offensive rants.

**Consider the Self-Effacement Option.** If you completely forget to reply to an email, remember that it's never too late to do so (project or other timeline matters notwithstanding). Sending email saying "I'm such an idiot – so sorry for not replying sooner. Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa," can often atone for days or weeks of silence.

## Closing Thoughts

I have two diverging trains of thought.

First, in the plainest language I can find, I'm mightily PO'ed and a bit dismayed when I make an effort to help people and don't receive even a cursory thank-you in return. That said, I enjoy problem solving, and will probably always reply to sincere questions and inquiries, even if it is with a diminished expectation of acknowledgment.

Second (and more calmly) is the larger point. To grow professionally, you have to participate in professional activities. And to get the most out of them and to be well-regarded in the professional community, you have to consider your behavior as well as your technical skills. Don't assume that having superior programming skills automatically equips you with the requisite social skills. For many of us, these are acquired, not innate, capabilities. Fortunately, the basics of courteous professional behavior are not that hard to learn. It only requires calm, thoughtful, and good-natured communication in a community of ideas. Treat the ideas as you would a guest in your home and you're on the right track.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote the following in his 1844 essay, "Manners":

Manners aim to facilitate life, to get rid of impediments, and bring the man pure to energize. They aid our dealing and conversation, as a railway aids travelling, by getting rid of all avoidable obstructions of the road, and leaving nothing to be conquered but pure space.

Today, I suppose we would call it striving for more signal and less noise, but the larger point persists. Greater sensitivity to our conduct moves us closer to creating a professional community of pure, noiseless space.

## Contact Me

I'd love to hear your thoughts on this important topic. Email [Frank@CodeCraftersInc.com](mailto:Frank@CodeCraftersInc.com) or to SAS-L or other lists. The topic may not be as technically meaty as "SQL pass-through failure connection to DB2," but it is timely and important.

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