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Text-messaging etiquette evolving

Younger people often play by looser rules

By Megan Finnerty
The Arizona Republic

No one was really surprised to hear about the pending Britney-K-Fed divorce, but one element has us reeling.

She dumped him with a text message.

"I H8 U, loser!" was the digital Dear John that Britney Spears, 24, reportedly sent to Kevin Federline, 28.

It's a new low, even for a woman who goes barefoot into gas-station bathrooms.

With cell phone text messaging, the 219.4 million U.S. wireless users can instantly communicate whatever thought their fingers spell out.

Verizon Wireless reported a record 5 billion text messages in September, 3 billion more than in the same month a year earlier.

Each tiny text is a chance for us to offend in 160 characters or fewer. Some socially accepted rules for when, where and what to text exist, but the medium is so new, etiquette experts are addressing the issue, says author and etiquette expert Joy Weaver of Dallas.

"There's no texting at weddings, funerals, religious services or during business meetings," says the author of "Just Ask Joy: How to be Socially Savvy in All Situations" (Brown Books, 2005, \$14.99). "People may do it, but they should leave the room, just like they would to take a call."

And although we cringe at Britney's breakup, it has been worse.

In 2003, British insurer Accident Group sacked 2,400 employees via text message, and in 2005, the human-resources director of a French radio station did the same to staffers.

To most, it seems obvious that such business ought not be conducted via text. But in a few years, that assumption may not be so universal.

The gap is widening between the younger and older generations as text messaging becomes the preferred method of communication for high schoolers and college students.

Most adults 20 and older say it's never OK to ask a person out with a text, but most teens say it's fine, according to a recent survey from Samsung.

As for Britney, only 11 percent of Americans older than 15 think it's acceptable to break up via text. However, 22 percent of 13- to 15-year-olds say it's OK.

Text messaging is a way of life for young people, with its own conventions, says Jim Farrelly, an English professor at the University of Dayton in Ohio. His students are so used to the language of text messaging that they use the abbreviations in formal papers.

Those papers get a failing grade in his class.

"(Messaging) is engendering bad habits at all levels of the population, but primarily with young people," he said.

Letters, then e-mails, were once the easiest and least confrontational ways to communicate, and now text messaging has lowered the bar again.

And the trend isn't slowing or likely to reverse, says Marc Lamont Hill, professor of urban education at Temple University in Philadelphia.

"In 20 years, we might not think anything of getting dumped with a text message," he said.