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Smile When You Call Me That...

William "Skip" Boyer
Best Western International Inc.

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One of the very first western movies I remember with any degree of accuracy is *The Virginian*, with Gary Cooper in the title role. It's a classic, as is the 1906 novel by Owen Wister on which the movie is based.

If you saw it, perhaps you remember the scene early in the movie when a surly character calls the Virginian a "sonofabitch."

Cooper turns and with a nasty steel edge to his voice says, "Smile when you call me that." Or words to that effect. The point is obvious: There are two ways to call someone an SOB. One means you are an SOB. The other, with the smile, means you're a good 'ole boy SOB and how ya been doin', anyway?

Let's leave the classic cinema for a moment and cut to an e-mail I received recently.

The writer, a colleague, said some harsh things. I was surprised. Then I was disappointed. Then I was angry. And it was then that I sat down to my keyboard. I knew just how I was going to respond. I was going to tell him that his mother was best of breed and his sister dove for Roto-Rooter and his father starred in medical training films for the military and that he has the IQ of a salad bar. Then I was going to get mad.

Then he stuck his head in my office. We're located just a couple of doors apart, of course. I thought, "I'll nail him!" He professed innocence. Hadn't he written the original offending e-mail? Of course. But that wasn't what he meant. He meant something entirely different. And he said it with a smile.

Geez.

All that terrific venom wasted.

This is not the first time this has happened. E-mail, I believe, is incredible. Here, on my desk, is an access to the most sophisticated communications system in the history of our species. And in our rush to use it, a couple of unexpected things are developing.

The first is what I call the Smile When You Call Me That Syndrome.

E-mail, by its very nature, removes all body language and voice tone. If you call me an SOB, I can tell which way you mean it by your voice and body language. I don't have that edge in e-mail. Words alone aren't enough, I think. They express the idea but not the context. They give the information but not the environment in which the information will be used. It isn't enough.

The end results are misunderstandings, sometimes of nearly violent proportions. I see it almost daily in my corporate e-mail and, most especially, in a couple of e-mail discussion lists in which I participate. Sometimes, it's like being e-mailed.

E-mail, then, demands that we use care in our words. An angry recipient doesn't help get your message across.

The second unexpected thing developing from our rush to e-mail is what we'll call The Naked Truth Factor.

Suddenly, business executives, for example, are handling their own correspondence. There is no secretary or administrative assistant reviewing the content, context, spelling, grammar and punctuation. And the results are positively embarrassing. It numbs the mind to realize how many senior executives can't spell or don't have a clue what it means to have the verb and the subject in agreement. ("What the hell! Let 'em negotiate!")

Interestingly enough, I detect a couple of trends here. Clearly, more and more of our business and personal communications will move via e-mail or its next generation equivalent. But, if you read the work of today's high school students, you have to fear for the language. They can barely communicate with themselves, much less anyone above the age of 20

Now, the upside to all of this is that someone—like me—who writes for a living is never going to be out of work. The downside is that, sooner or later, the writers are all going to go to that great writers' block in the sky. And then where will the rest of you be?

But I digress.

E-mail and its various electronic sisters and brothers are incredible. I'm in regular touch now with family and friends I haven't written to in years. It's wonderful.

Despite its almost magical communications abilities, however, e-mail is placing tougher demands on us. We must use more care when we communicate. We must weigh our words carefully. And because we are now hanging it all out for the world to see, we must demonstrate a certain level of skill and respect in the use of our language—whatever that language may be.

We have this remarkable communications tool. I wonder, however, if we are communicators enough to use it well and wisely.

And, hey, Gary! I'm smiling! I'm smiling!

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