

Hands up those against hands-free

By Ruth Ostrow

Hands-free is always a term that amuses me. Good things happen hands-free ? things that you want to happen. Alas, hands-free got a bad rap on the news the other night. Users of hands-free mobiles are four times more likely to have a fatal car accident.

But what do people expect? How on Earth can you stitch up a business deal while trying to overtake a doddering Volvo, or avoid ploughing headlong into oncoming traffic while dodging a cyclist and saving a friend's marriage? I have trouble rubbing my tummy and poking out my tongue at the same time, and frankly I've never met a man who is bifunctional let alone ambidextrous, hands-on or hands-free.

The truth is, we've gone too far with multi-tasking, time-saving phone behaviour. Hands-free or 'portable' means 'distracted', and it is as rude as it is risky. Listening to clunking while someone cooks is bad enough, but toilet-flushing is simply too much information.

One woman reports that, on a recent phone consultation with her therapist, it wasn't until she heard a shop assistant saying 'thanks?' that she realised she had been diverted to a mobile headset. Her therapist was buying shoes: 'No, don't leave your husband' yes, the blue pair thanks.?

A friend even confronted me recently: 'Stop what you are doing and give me 100 per cent of your attention, or I'm going to hang up!' she said over my 'eeewww' noises. 'I don't want much of your time, but I want it exclusively. I refuse to compete with cat vomit!' I've adopted my friend's line ever since. When people sneak a Shane-Warne-style 'You were hot last night, babe! SMS under the restaurant table, or yell abuse at passing drivers, I beseech them: 'Give me your everything or give me nothing!'

And that's the thing: porta-phone etiquette has to be a two-way street. I reckon there are low-maintenance activities that are hands-free or headset-friendly 'brushing the cat, applying calamine lotion to mosquito bites. But anything requiring real attention' frying chips, changing a nappy or saving a corporation from ruin ' must remain mono-functional and out of phone-chat range. We need to be there for each other. Really be there.

Next time someone puts you on speaker phone, call waiting, turns on the vac, or begins twiddling with text messages between their legs, yell the new battle cry: 'Stop it or you'll go blind, you wanker.'

www.ruthostrow.com

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