

[E-Commerce Times](#) > [Entertainment](#) > [iPod](#)

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Writing the iPod Etiquette Rule Book



By Vikki Ortiz
The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
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A few years ago, Alex Halavais, a professor who studies the social effects of technology, was flabbergasted when students stopped by his office for help but left one iPod ear bud in the ear. Today, he's come to expect it. "It's something that we negotiate over time," he said. "It takes some time to evolve

those social codes."

Scott Schwebel was busy at work and didn't want to be bothered. So when a colleague approached with a question, Schwebel did what he thought was appropriate.

He took out one, not two, of his iPod ear buds.

"That annoys the hell out of me," said his colleague, Tim McKee, who used the opportunity to give his co-worker at Hanson Dodge in Milwaukee, a mini-manners lesson.

"I said, 'Dude, take that out,'" McKee recalled. "It's that whole, 'Are you listening to me, or are you listening to music?'"

Evolving Negotiations

So it goes in this age of evolving [technology](#) and etiquette. As iPod digital portable music players continue to be the pop-culture symbol for concentration and cool, people all across the area are shuffling to define MP3 manners.

Wear an iPod during high school geometry? Rude.

Take one ear bud out when a flight attendant is taking your drink order? Tolerated.

Keep it on at work? It all depends.

"Nobody sets the rules for these things," said Alex Halavais, a professor who studies the social effects of technology at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

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Millions Have Been Sold

Since iPods were introduced by [Apple](#) (Nasdaq: AAPL) in 2002, more than 42 million have been sold around the world. In 2005, more than 15.7 million were sold in the United States -- more than double the 6 million sold in 2004 -- and those numbers don't include sales over the Internet or at Wal-Mart, according to Leander Kahney, author of *The Cult of iPod*.

At this rate, iPods are expected to surpass the popularity that [Sony](#) (NYSE: SNE) Walkmans had in the 1980s, said Kahney, who also is managing editor of *Wired* magazine.

There are a few possible reasons why iPods continue to be a pop culture "must-have" -- from people enjoying technology they've never had before to simple fashion.

"It's an easier way than jewelry to say that I can afford to spend this much money on something that's just for play," Halavais said.

People also love iPods because Internet downloads and podcasts meet society's current need to personalize the products they use and put them in touch with a network of people around the world, he added -- which isn't always a good thing for the people right in front of your face.

Just ask the employees at New Urban Salon in Milwaukee. Nearly half of the staff have their own iPods, and therefore their own music collections -- but only one iPod can be plugged into the salon's overhead speakers at a time.

As a result, there are daily debates between Frank Sinatra and Parliament. Some employees go so far as to sneak their iPod into the speakers when another iPod owner isn't looking.

To avoid major battles, salon owner Nick Papageorgio keeps the stereo close to his chair and personally monitors the overhead listening, preaching "equal time for everybody."

"That's the only way in a large operation like this that it's going to be fair," he said.

Not Welcome Everywhere

Some places have banned the trendy gadgets all together. At Milwaukee's Nicolet High School, students with iPods are required to keep them in their lockers during the school day. If they don't, they face a range of punishments starting with a warning and culminating with confiscation.

"It isn't our first job to be iPod police," said Principal Elliott Moeser.

And although iPods are commonplace at most area health clubs, Matthew Barber, a Milwaukee personal trainer, said he would walk out of a session if a client dared to use one.

"I couldn't imagine how rude it would be for me to train someone when they couldn't hear me," he said.

Other people have learned to be lenient. Joe Hemmer, a professor of communication at Carroll College in Waukesha, Wisc., recently allowed a student to keep his iPod on during a First Amendment law exam. The student said he needed to hear classical music to stay calm.

"It made sense to me," said Hemmer, who borrowed the student's ear buds for a second, just to be sure the student wasn't really jamming to exam answers. "It was very soothing music. I actually enjoyed it."

Tom Geibel, 23, a recent University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee graduate, saw somebody wearing an iPod during his commencement ceremony. He wouldn't do that or wear his iPod at, say, a live band performance, but he does wear it during slow times at his restaurant job, which is against the rules.

"When you're rolling napkins, what else are you supposed to do?" he asked.

So maybe, for now, iPod etiquette is all in the communication. At Hanson Dodge, co-workers Schwebel and McKee have reached an iPod understanding. McKee knows Schwebel means no offense when he leaves an ear bud in for quick conversations, and Schwebel knows McKee means no harm when he demands his co-worker take the ear buds out.

Still, Peter Post, great-grandson of etiquette maven Emily Post, called the one-bud solution ridiculous.



Post said technology doesn't have to mean less etiquette as long as users never stop communicating and building relationships with each other. He can't imagine a scenario when leaving one ear bud in would be good manners.

"I don't buy that at all," Post said. "Put it on pause. Focus on them."

Rules of the iPod Road

Although there are no hard-and-fast rules on iPod etiquette, here's a look at what people at various places in the Milwaukee area would think if you kept your ear buds in:

- Sanford restaurant: Not a problem, as long as your listening doesn't disrupt other diners.

- Potawatomi Bingo Casino: No electronic devices, including iPods, are allowed on the casino floor.
- Marcus Theaters: If the lights on your iPod are bothering others, an usher will ask you to turn it off. No video iPods.
- Mitchell International Airport: Remove it when you go through [security](#) . Make sure you can still hear your flight information.
- Midwest Airlines: Acceptable after 10,000 feet in the air. Be courteous of the people next to you.
- Milwaukee County Courthouse: Turn them off in the courtroom or the judge will stop the proceedings.
- Waukesha County Sheriff's Department: It's not against the law to wear an iPod while driving in Wisconsin, but you can be fined US\$173.40 if it contributes to an accident. 

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