

How to read a reply card

If you can't come to the wedding, it's nice to write a short note here offering congratulations to the bridal couple. If you really want to be formal, send a separate card with the RSVP, or in a separate envelope, expressing how sorry you are that you can't be there and extending good wishes for the future.

Many traditional RSVP cards contain the stilted phrasing and British spelling (*favour* instead of *favor*) of a more formal era. Invitations to more casual American events might be more direct: "Please respond by Nov. 6."

The mysterious M _____ line. Here is where you write who is coming to the wedding — Mr. and Mrs. Smith, or Mr. Smith or Ms. Smith, as the case may be. Remember: Don't bring extra guests if they haven't been invited. A host will usually specify if children are welcome; if not, don't assume — call before bringing the little darlings.

This is where you write NOT if you can't come to the wedding. If you are coming, leave this blank. Don't check or put an X there; it will only confuse the host.

Photo by H. Darr Beiser, USA TODAY; RSVP card from Crane's

Every year, millions of Americans open their mail, find an invitation and wonder: What the heck does RSVP mean?

For those in the dark, it does NOT mean Refreshments Served Very Promptly. It does not mean throw the invitation in a pile and forget about it. It does not mean respond only if you're not coming, or respond the day of the party, or respond and then fail to show up. And it most certainly does not mean show up with extra guests.

"It's French for 'Tell Me If You Plan to Attend My Party So That I Know How Many Batches of Artichoke Dip to Make,'" say the Etiquette Grrls, a Gen X duo of self-proclaimed etiquette experts.

These days, they say, you could build a political party on the righteous indignation of brides, hosts, party planners and event organizers throughout the land who demand to know: Why don't people RSVP anymore?

Lesley Carlin, 28, one of the Grrls and co-author of *Things You Need to be Told*, their handbook on polite behavior in a rude and tacky world, says some people just forget to RSVP, but others are waiting for a better offer — "which is even ruder."

"This is one of the most frequent questions we get on our Web site (www.etiquettegrrls.com) — how to get people to RSVP," Carlin says. "Maybe not quite as many as the white-shoes-after-Labor-Day question, but it's up there."

So, let's hear it for the wisdom of *Laverne & Shirley*, those kooky kids from the '70s sitcom who came up with an inspired definition of RSVP: Respond So Very Promptly. Yuk, yuk, but they were

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Mom was right: It's rude not to RSVP

Casual attitude is driving hosts crazy

By Maria Puente
USA TODAY

right, if not literally.

Actually, RSVP is the acronym for *répondez s'il vous plaît*, or "Respond If You Please."

In the old days, we knew what RSVP meant because Mom told us all about it; some schools even taught basic manners in home-ec classes. "A generation ago, when you received an invitation, you were expected to respond on your own stationery," says Margaret Shepherd, a calligrapher and author of *The Art of the Handwritten Note*, which aims to reclaim "civilized communication."

But RSVPs are common these days, which perhaps makes them seem less deserving of our attention. Twenty-five years ago, it would have been rare to see an RSVP for a wedding, much less a child's birthday party. Back then, it was mostly the elite who encountered RSVPs. Now, they go to ordinary schmoe who might have grown up in households where an RSVP never showed its face.

Party-givers make it easy to RSVP, by enclosing stamped, self-addressed cards. Some brides send save-the-date cards — sales of these have increased sharply — months or even years in advance to make sure guests have plenty of time to plan. They set up Web sites to take RSVPs by e-mail. Hostesses include phone numbers and deadlines for replying. And *still*, people don't RSVP.

How come so many people are clueless? "They've been raised by wolves and have the manners to reflect it," snaps Jennifer Kay Cortese, 31, of Royal Oak, Mich., who's still annoyed about

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Courtesy has become a 'lost art'

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the quarter of her guests who had to be called — some more than once — to find out if they would attend her wedding. “I had one woman RSVP to both (shower and wedding) and then not show up at

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either. She never so much as made mention of an apology, nor did she send a card, a gift — nothing.”

The regrettable truth is that we've lost the idea that there are common courtesies we all endorse. “The ‘rules’ allow us to feel comfortable and confident in any social occasion we may encounter,” says Lisa Mirza Grotts, 39, who runs an etiquette and protocol-consulting firm in San Francisco. “It’s a lost art.”

Maybe it's just another unfortunate consequence of our go, go, go society: Our manners finally got up and left. Maybe it's about being in denial: We fear hurting a friend's feelings by saying no to her party, so we just don't deal with it.

Or maybe it's the usual suspects. “Too much TV, too much acceptance of the lowest common denominator,” laments Michael Beaton, 51, of Marshalltown, Iowa.

Whatever, exasperation is everywhere. An October etiquette survey for Lenox, the gift company, found that 73% of respondents think manners are worse today than 25 years ago. Only 23% rated manners excellent or good.

They need a head count

Lenox special events manager Denise Dinyon says failure to RSVP may reflect the shift in the tenor of entertainment, away from formal sit-down meals to more open family-style or buffet meals. “If people feel they will be seated at a table, they're more compelled to RSVP, but if they're just putting in an appearance at a cocktail party, they think the host won't need to know how many chairs to have.”

Ask people about their experience with RSVPs and a torrent of venting and ranting and fuming pours out. Words like “lazy” and “rude” and “obnoxious” and “ticked off” are mentioned. Everyone has shocking — shocking! — tales of inconsiderate behavior: Brides with no head count only days before the wedding. Parents with no idea how many are coming to their child's birthday party at Chuck E. Cheese. Dinner parties with not enough food because someone didn't RSVP and showed up with out-of-town guests.

Some people are just plain misinformed: They think RSVP is Latin, or maybe Italian. They think it means respond only if you'll be there. Or regrets only.

Lame excuses for not RSVP'ing

Margaret Miller, 56, a semi-retired public relations consultant who has hosted many parties at home in Annapolis, Md., knows all about people who forget to RSVP — because she forgets, too. “I am the worst, and there is no excuse,” she says with a sheepish laugh. She has come up with her own list of top 10 reasons people don't RSVP.

- 10 The dog ate my invitation.
- 9 I do not speak French.
- 8 I might have a better offer.
- 7 I am not comfortable at parties that require RSVPs; too formal.
- 6 I like to keep the host wondering.
- 5 I do not want to go, so I will pretend the invitation was lost in the mail and feign surprise if they call.
- 4 I am rude and want to make a statement.
- 3 The post office and mailbox are too far away.
- 2 I really have lost the invitation (they send them soooooo early these days) and do not know how to contact the host.
- 1 My life is overscheduled, and this is one of those things I forgot.

Others think it's OK to pick and choose. “I always reply to things that are important to my family and friends,” says Lowell Young, 67, of Mariposa, Calif. “I never reply to RSVPs from sources I don't know. Sadly, the commercial use of RSVPs has diminished their value, and people ignore them now.”

When Heather Tierney, 32, of Eureka, Calif., calls to say her son can't make it to a party, some hostesses act as if she's “from Mars,” she says. “I get dead silence on the other end of the phone, as if to say, ‘Well, if you're not coming, why are you calling us?’”

Robin Thompson, who runs a charm school and online etiquette bulletin board (www.etiquette-network.com) in Pekin, Ill., says she believes most people have “good intentions” about RSVPs, then simply forget to do it.

But she also acknowledges that there have been fundamental changes in society. “Both parents work, often they don't sit down for an evening meal together, which is where kids learn social skills. Plus, we live in a very relaxed atmosphere right now,” Thompson says.

Brides, however, are rarely relaxed, and the failure to RSVP makes their wedding planning all the more frantic. “I mean, how hard is it to call and say ‘Yes, I'm coming’ or ‘No, I won't be able to make it?’” asks Mary Katherine Petty, 25, of Tulsa, who got married over the weekend.

Sharon Stidham, 40, of Plano, Texas, frequently throws parties for her two kids and their friends at the local skating rink or pizza place, but she has learned to expect few RSVPs and between 10% and 50% no-shows — which can be costly for the hostess. “We all have the same horrible constraints on our time, yet so many people think that the world revolves around them,” she says.

Professional party planners complain about RSVP failures, too. Barbara Boggs, a well-connected event planner in Washington, D.C.,

says a widespread lack of social skills is one reason why her business flourishes, and why laboriously calling invited guests in advance has become a standard element of her service. She says people on Capitol Hill are especially notorious for not calling in RSVPs. “You have to hammer them three or four times, and even if they say yes, nine times out of 10 they won't show,” Boggs says.

'The President requests ...'

Maybe the only host in America who doesn't have a problem with RSVPs is the president. For security reasons, guests are required to call well in advance of White House parties to confirm attendance. And they always do. “That kind of invitation is so rare, people go out of their way to change their calendars to make sure they get there,” says Ann Stock, social secretary under President Clinton, who now plans major events at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

So what to do about this RSVP problem? No one seems to know. The Etiquette Grrls think — hope — the pendulum is swinging back, that manners are “in” again. And some hope that e-mail will help.

“E-mail was supposed to do in letter-writing, but what it's done is make millions more people comfortable with communicating through the written word, which has spilled over to note- and letter-writing,” says Peter Hopkins, spokesman for Crane's, the high-end stationery company.

Others think it would help to use English instead of French. “It makes me think the sender is trying to sound sophisticated,” grumbles Dave Shipman, 37, of Winchendon, Mass. “If the audience is primarily an English-speaking one, use English: ‘Please Reply.’”

But Alison Frederick, 31, of Indianapolis, has an intriguing idea: “Maybe we should develop our own phrase for the U.S. — like CIYC (‘Call If You're Coming’).”