



## Text & Love

Succeeding on the dating & relating scene requires a new set of skills

By Nicole Beland

Aisling McDonagh, a 35-year-old sales director at a national magazine and single woman in New York, is constantly being asked out via text. A 41-year-old lawyer she met at a yoga class recently sent *Any chance ur free 2night?* A day later, a former colleague wrote *Wud it be 2 forward 2 ask u out by text?* In both cases, McDonagh's response was something along the lines of *Maybe. Call me.*

"Texting has become such an accepted form of communication among daters that guys try to use it for everything," complains McDonagh. "Suggesting a first date via text is too passive and convenient. I want to be wooed the way leading men did it in old movies—to get a bouquet of flowers so big you can't even see my head behind it."

Whether old-fashioned romantics like it or not, texting has infiltrated our love lives to the point where, according to the definitive AT&T survey on the topic, 74% of texters ages 18 to 34 have flirted by tapping out a message on their cell phone or PDA, and in some instances—long distance relationships, for example—texting has become the primary form of couple communication.

The latest trend: text-based dating services like Match Mobile and MeetMoi. "One the reasons people avoid calling a potential date is the tremendous anxiety—When should I call? Will they pick up? What should I say?" says Andrew Weinreich, founder of MeetMoi, a breakthrough service that uses GPS to link compatible singles who happen to be in the same part of town. After viewing photos and profiles on their phone, members can text each other immediately and potentially meet up within minutes. "Texting gives people the courage to be themselves because it allows you to communicate without your nerves getting in the way," says Weinreich.

Is all this hot and heavy texting a good or bad thing? "Text messaging is the lazy person's way to keep in touch and, since most of us are lazy, it means more people get in touch more often," says Pepper Schwartz, Ph.D., a sociology professor at the University of Washington, relationship expert, and author of *Finding Your Perfect Match*. "But while it's good for last-minute logistics like *8pm still ok?* and sweet nothings like *Thinking of You*, complex feelings, disagreements, and misunderstanding are much better dealt with by phone or, gasp, in person."

Naomi Baron, Ph.D., a professor of Linguistics at American University in Washington, D.C. and author of *Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World*, believes it will take time before daters improve their text etiquette, but that it will happen. “Right now texting is so new to Americans—other countries have been using SMS services for much longer—that they’re going a little crazy with it,” says Baron. For guidance, the textually challenged typically turn to their peers for advice (58% of texters in the AT&T survey admit to showing messages to their friends). But blog entries and online videos devoted to text do’s and don’ts—see the “How to Lose a Guy in Ten Texts” clip on Howcast.com—are popping up in droves.

Dating experts encourage both men and women to take texting as it comes. “Texting seems to be guys’ preferred method for contacting women, asking them out, and staying in touch,” says Nancy Slotnick, a dating coach and founder of cablight.com. “I tell female clients that if they want to meet more men, they should accept this fact, rather than fight it.” Matt Titus, author of *Why Hasn’t He Called* agrees with that advice, especially in the initial stages of a relationship. “Later on, you can and should ask a man to call you more often. But in the beginning a guy is really putting himself on the line and risking a lot of rejection. By being willing to text, you make it easier on men, which ultimately translates to more options for you.”

John Alewine, a 25-year-old sales rep in Kansas City, Missouri, has no complaints about texting, other than the fact that his phone’s automatic spelling-corrector often undermines his messages, like the time he tried to write a Homer Simpson-esque *D’doh* as a one-word reply to a woman’s email and ended up sending *Dog*. “It depends on how busy I am that day, but generally I’m a texting freak and don’t mind getting as many messages as a girl can send.” What if someone, a.k.a. a text stalker, hits ‘send’ so often it becomes a nuisance? Ditching them is as easy as blocking their number.

For committed couples, texting can be an effortless way to stay in touch (28% text their significant other at least three times a day, according to AT&T) as well as a surprising source of romance. “My live-in boyfriend is a doctor and when he’s stuck at the hospital for a 24-hour shift, we text back and forth a lot,” says Jessica Levine, a 27-year-old freelance writer in Portland, Oregon. “Besides being a nice distraction, texting keeps things from getting stale—I feel like it helps us maintain that flirty rapport we had in the beginning of our relationship.”

Texting continues to grow at exponential rates—the wireless industry trade association CTIA recently reported that 75 billion text messages were sent and received this past June, compared to 28.8 billion in June of 2007, marking a 250%

increase. AT&T customers alone sent and received more text messages in the first half of this year than in all of 2007. As its popularity skyrockets, Dr. Schwartz cautions daters and couples to remain aware of the limitations of texting. “Tone is lost when texting—A message that sounds casual may have much more meaning behind it and vice versa,” she warns. “And keep in mind that not all texts go through. Don’t assume you’re being ignored or even dumped because you don’t receive a reply.” Whenever you feel a hint of confusion or doubt, advises Schwartz, give your thumbs a rest and call.

\*\*\*\*\*

To help women and guys use texting to their advantage, Nicole Beland, features director of *Women’s Health* magazine and relationship expert, offers the following tips on improving your text life.

### **Texting Don’ts**

**Don’t guess.** If a message is cryptic or vague, wait until you’re face to face with the sender to ask what the heck they were talking about. Texts leave so much to the imagination that it’s easy to let wishful thinking or insecurity take over. When you get a message that makes no sense, respond with “What?! Let’s talk I8tr!” Then stifle your urge to analyze.

**Don’t over-abbreviate.** You want to be brief in a text message, but stick with terms and symbols that most people know and use. If you try to make up new texting terms on the spot, you’ll end up sending gibberish.

**Don’t be a tease.** Text-flirting is all fun and games—provided that you’re being honest about your feelings. Verbal flirting is such a blast that it’s easy to get carried away. Over-do the Sex & the City style banter and you run the risk raising someone’s expectations only to hurt his or her feelings or, worse, attract an unwanted admirer.

**Don’t text angry.** Sure, you can express general frustration with a ‘Grrrr...’ or a “Humph” or an “Ugh,” but pick up the phone to hash things out. Attempt to resolve a volatile situation in 25-character bursts and you’ll create a hot mess that will be hell to clean up.

**Don’t be rude or break bad news.** Breaking up via text may be efficient, but it isn’t classy—and in a hyper-connected culture, a bad reputation can spread fast. Any

type of textual bad behavior is likely to get around.

## **Texting Do's**

**Do text sweet nothings.** With today's crazed schedules, it can be hard to pick up the phone or even send an email. A short text like "Hey, qt," or "Hope ur havin a gr8 day, " can make your significant other suddenly happier to see you when you get home. 52% of texters surveyed said they'd rather receive a "Thinking of You" message than any other kind.

**Do text long-distance.** According to the AT&T survey, 15% of daters in long-distance relationships send texts more often than they email or call. Texting can create a surprising sense of connection because it's so immediate—you can send messages the second they pop into your mind. Even though you're miles away, your partner feels right there.

**Do text before a first date.** 34% of people surveyed agree that they'd feel more comfortable on a first date if they had exchanged texts beforehand. Keep pre-date communication light and fun. Ask about his or her favorite bands, movies, and places to hang out, then use the info to kickstart conversation when you're sitting across the table.

**Do respond ASAP.** Most people are never far from their cell phone, so if you don't reply within an hour or so, the other person will assume they're being ignored. As a matter of fact, the biggest texting turn-off according to the AT&T survey was a slow response. If you don't have time to answer, reply with something like "Stuck in mtg. Will hit you soon!" If you can't even do that, be sure to add "Sorry! Just got this," when you finally do text him or her back.