



Your cell phone ringtone speaks volumes about you

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Jessica Sneed was in church when her cell phone rang unexpectedly, blaring a two-second loop of a raucous hip-hop song for the whole congregation to hear.

"It was this really loud, obnoxious Outkast song, with these horns and these drums," said Sneed, 19, a University of Florida freshman. "And it wasn't even during a time when the pastor was talking - it was during prayer. I got up and went to the bathroom, and was like, 'Well, I can't go back in there.' "

The \$2.50 Sneed spent to download the offending Outkast ringtone represents a small piece of a multibillion-dollar global market that is forming its own niche in the music industry and creating a host of new etiquette dilemmas.

The Recording Industry Association of America now awards ringtones its traditional gold and platinum designations for sales milestones, and Billboard Music charts the most downloaded ringtones with a top 40 list.

The ringtone explosion isn't limited to popular music. The Center for Biological Diversity offers a host of free ringtones featuring the calls of endangered animals, from the howl of a Mexican gray wolf to the squawk of a blue-throated macaw.

Sneed's friend Alisha Lewis, 18, said she recently used her cell phone to record an African drum performance at a pageant for UF's African Students Union, and has used the recording as her ringtone.

"I suppose this was absolutely inevitable," said Robert Thompson, a professor of popular culture at Syracuse University. "There are only a few things that allow us a huge menu of choices of ways to express ourselves - the way we dress, the way we wear our hair and the bumper stickers on our cars are a few. A ringtone becomes a bumper sticker of sorts. Because cell phones are totally portable, ringtones act as a public identity symbol - your own public theme song."

A phone owner's choice of ringtone can speak volumes about his or her personality, Thompson said.

"If you're a pretentious person, you may want to advertise how tasteful you are by making your ringtone the opening theme from Beethoven's Fifth, or Handel's 'Water Music,' " Thompson said. "If you want to appear young and with it, you can choose something much more contemporary. To me, it seems that the best bet is something simple. It's like choosing what to wear: When you put on a simple pair of bluejeans, you give away absolutely nothing."

Corporate etiquette trainer Barbara Pachter, author of "The Jerk With the Cell Phone: A Survival Guide for the Rest of Us," said that too often, people portray themselves as unprofessional and thoughtless by using loud, musical ringtones in public.

"In the office, I don't need to be startled by Beethoven's Fifth," Pachter said. "Hearing that 'dun-dun-dun-DUN' drives me crazy. Personally, I just like a ring. What's wrong with a ring?"

Jacqueline Whitmore, a cell phone etiquette consultant for Sprint and author of "Business Class: Etiquette Essentials for Success at Work," said there are legitimate uses for personalized cell phone rings in public.

"It's easy to understand why a parent who's expecting a call from a baby sitter to program a specific ring so he or she can know who's calling without having to look down at the phone all the time," Whitmore said. "In certain situations, it's great."

Not-so-great ringtone situations arise most often at work, Whitmore said, when a small distraction can be a major issue.

Whitmore said she advises clients to stay away from musical ringtones in the office altogether, saying there are lots of standard ringtones "that are actually quite appropriate."

"The kind that sound like an actual ring or a little bell or something are great," Whitmore said. "The trouble is when you start to get into melodies where the phone plays one bit over and over and over. It can be something as innocent as Yankee Doodle or a song by a famous performer; when you hear it over and over again, it becomes a distraction."

Sneed, who said she's been cautious about her cell phone since the Outkast incident in church, said she's not sure putting a phone on vibrate solves anything.

"You'll be sitting there in class, and someone's phone will vibrate, and all you hear is, 'Mmmm, mmmm,' " Sneed said. "It vibrates the whole table. Now, I just turn mine off."

Pachter said confronting someone with an offensive ringtone at work or elsewhere must be done carefully, politely and only after considering the source.

"It's important to consider whether this is an ongoing situation," Pachter said. "If you're walking down the hall and you hear an annoying ring, don't worry about it. If it's someone you sit next to every day, it's fine to ask them to remember to put their phone on silent mode. If they're approached politely, most people are happy to comply."

Pachter and Whitmore both said etiquette issues almost always plague new technology.

"Until a few years ago, not everyone had cell phones," Pachter said. "At this point, some kindergartners have them. There's a learning curve with new technology where, after the technology appears, it takes a while for us to get used to it and to learn how to use it politely."

In the meantime, Sneed and Lewis said it may help to remember that funky ringtones aren't all bad.

"When someone's phone goes off in class and they can't find the phone right away, if it's a popular song, everyone starts dancing around a little bit," Lewis said, bobbing her head. "That's

the main reason people have those ringtones - so that when someone calls, everyone who hears it starts jamming."