

Janet Fletcher

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

'Please respond' is no joke. So lick that stamp now!

English abounds with abbreviations that virtually everyone gets, from BYOB to WASP. Nobody needs a translation for ATMs, RBIs or, now, WMDs. Then why do so many of us have trouble with that shorthand phrase we've seen since childhood, the one at the bottom of most invitations?

"It doesn't mean call me if you can come or call me if you can't," wrote a peeved Berkeley parent in an online chat about RSVPs. "It means RESPOND."

For parents who need to know how many cupcakes and goodie bags to have at their 6-year-old's birthday party, or for anxious brides who need a head count for the caterer, a reply is essential. But as anyone who has hosted a party in recent years can confirm, manners surrounding RSVPs have taken a dive. Party givers report every type of bad behavior, from never responding, to accepting but not showing, to bringing uninvited guests.

"People take it a little too casually," says Morton Beebe, a veteran San Francisco photojournalist who says that at least half the people he invited to his wedding party in Calistoga didn't respond. Others eventually confirmed but only did so well past the reply date. "Some people waited until they were in their car and on their way," Beebe says.

The event involved a tent, a caterer and considerable expense, leaving Beebe and his bride, San Francisco real estate agent Danielle Chavanon-Beebe, shocked at people's thoughtlessness. "Some were awfully good friends who just said, 'If we make it, we make it,'" recalls Beebe.

Most hosts, like Beebe and Chavanon-Beebe, have limited space but want to fill it. If guests don't send regrets promptly, it becomes too late to invite more. "I end up calling people more than 50 percent of the time," says Janice Beaman, who has frequent small dinner parties at her home in Napa. "It's frustrating because you may want to invite somebody else to make up your table of six."

Arguably worse than the guest who doesn't respond is the one who accepts and then doesn't show. At a wedding or other catered event, hosts have to pay for those missing in action, and dinner tables have undesirable holes. Janet Tsai, a database administrator in Sunnyvale, says about 20 people were no-shows at her recent wedding banquet, costing her an extra \$600. A few of them e-mailed her the day before, "but that was way too late," says Tsai. One couple decided at the last minute to go camping.

Most hosts put reply-by dates on invitations, especially for a catered event,



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but many say such dates are all but ignored. Rolando Beramendi, a New York food importer who hosted his own 40th birthday party in Tuscany last May, says that perhaps 10 people, out of more than 200, sent the stamped envelope and reply card back by the due date.

"It was a formal sit-down dinner, and I needed to work on who was going to sit with whom," says Beramendi. "I felt that the RSVP would convey that message, that this was a formal invitation. Did people think they were coming for a glass of wine and crostini?"

Beramendi stayed up the entire night before the party reworking the tables to accommodate the people who called at the last minute to say they were coming, and those who called at the last minute to say they weren't. Others took the liberty of expanding the guest list.

"You invite Mr. and Mrs. So-and-So and they write in 'four' instead of 'two,'" says Beramendi, who still sounds shell-shocked. "But the best were the people who marked 'one' and then showed up with a girlfriend." When they complained about not being seated near their companion, Beramendi said, "Look at your card. It said one."

Judd Finkelstein and Holly Jacobson-Finkelstein, who married a year ago in Napa Valley, say they had been warned about write-in guests. "We decided not to give people the option of listing how many would be coming," recalls Jacobson-Finkelstein. Instead, their reply card had only two options: love to, or love to but can't. The strategy minimized

uninvited guests but didn't eliminate them. Somebody still wrote in that they were bringing their sister.

At the least, recent brides and grooms say, you should call and ask if you may bring a new boyfriend or an escort. Many couples are under strict space or budget constraints. "You can only fit so many people, and you're trying to invite all the people you care about," says Erin Moore of Los Gatos, who had uninvited guests at her wedding this summer. "Then to have random people you don't even know at your wedding?"

Syndi Seid, founder of Advanced Etiquette in San Francisco, says she once heard about a minister who announced at the wedding that anyone who failed to RSVP to the reception shouldn't stay. "It's regrettable that he had to do it," says Seid, "but the (wedding couple) apparently got a clue that some people were planning to stay and they were upset. I bet those people will never not RSVP again."

Etiquette experts are at a loss to explain how Americans got such bad manners. Some surmise that today's young people don't know what RSVP really means. (For the record, it stands for the French phrase, "Répondez, s'il vous plaît," meaning "Reply please.") But some apparently think they need to respond only if they are coming.

Antonia Allegra, a St. Helena-based career coach who learned her manners at the very proper Convent of the Sacred Heart in San Francisco in the 1960s, says she once called to decline an invitation

and was asked, "Then why did you RSVP?"

Mary Risley, owner of Tante Marie's Cooking School in San Francisco and a frequent host, says she thinks the carelessness about RSVPs reflects the immediacy of contemporary life. Members of the wired generation live on their cell phones, eat when they want to eat and make plans on the spur of the moment. They wouldn't dream of committing now to an event three weeks hence.

"I think it's inexcusable," says Susan RoAne, a San Francisco speaker, trainer and author of "RoAne's Rules: How to Make the Right Impression." She suspects that the popularity of evite.com, specializing e-mail-based invitations, has produced a generation that can't be bothered to pick up the phone, put a reply in the mail or commit until the last minute. Her own book party generated a disturbing number of "I'll try" and "I'm not sure" responses from colleagues—people who, she vows, won't get invited to anything requiring a head count again.

In her eyes, the failure to RSVP, even to a business invitation, makes an unequivocal statement. It says the non-responder is disorganized, can't prioritize, doesn't follow through and has "no working knowledge of etiquette," writes RoAne in an online rant. Such behavior "speaks volumes," she says, "and let's stamp it out immediately."

In times past, good manners dictated that you reply to an invitation in the same way it was issued. A written invitation required a written response, a phone invitation could be answered by phone. Although the rules have relaxed considerably, formal invitations with reply cards still call for a formal response. Don't call the bride's mother and tell her you're coming. Don't e-mail your reply, no matter how close you are. Put the card in the mail, sooner rather than later.

"Whatever the invitation," says Seid, "you should try to respond within a week and always before the reply-by date. Never be a no-show. If you accept but your plans change, cancel immediately."

For his part, Beramendi says he will never try a formal reply card again. It was, he figures, a waste of paper and stamps. "I think people don't even know how to go to the mailbox anymore," he complains. "For my masquerade ball in Venice"—his fantasy 50th birthday party—"it's all going to be done on a Web site."

E-mail Janet Fletcher at jfletcher@sfchronicle.com.