

Opinion: Call me Mr. Woolfrey, unless you know me

BY JOHN WOOLFREY, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE AUGUST 3, 2011

MONTREAL - Being called by my first name by people I don't know really bugs me, especially when it's telephone customer-service people. Call me old-fashioned, but I don't believe anyone other than friends, family and acquaintances should ever call me John. It's a matter of respect. Besides, I have a unique last name that's full of history and meaning. I want to show it off. Any Tom, Dick or Harry can be called "John." Boring!

Even in emails, I bristle when the subject line is, "John, you have 20 new Air Miles." Maybe it's because when someone begins a sentence with your first name, they're usually admonishing you, as in "John, I told you before ... " If you think about it, that's one of the few times friends ever use another's name in the middle of a conversation.

I love that my pharmacist, with whom I've shared a joke or two over the past 12 years, always addresses me as Monsieur Woolfrey, and I her as Madame Phan. Coming from Vietnam, she's old world. Same with my Haitian mechanic, except after a year I asked him to call me John – after all, we're both men (a factor in his culture more than in mine), we're about the same age, and he lets me wander the garage freely. But out of respect, he waited until I suggested it.

In French, it's considered rude to call a stranger tu instead of vous, especially when that stranger is your elder. I would never dream of calling Monsieur or Madame Régimbald, the elderly couple who lived down the road from our cottage all my life, tu, or "Jeanine" and "Ernest." It would feel so intrusive, like poking through their underwear drawer. And they call me Monsieur Woolfrey.

Use of the first name by strangers tears down a comfortable wall of mutual respect.

Growing up I called my parents' friends Mr. This and Mrs. That, my relatives and godparents Aunt This and Uncle That. Today my nieces call me John. I miss the Uncle part. It made me feel special. When I was a boy, I received letters addressed to "Master Woolfrey." That may date me, but it made me feel special, kind of grown up. Such honorifics are the oil that lubricates society.

But everyone's on a first-name basis today, as though the world were one big AA meeting. Phone clerks never reveal their last names, though I understand the security reasons. Once a clerk politely asked, "May I call you John?" When I answered that I'd rather he didn't, he continued, "Well, John, we have ... " He wasn't expecting me to say no. Sometimes when I

politely ask them not to call me by my first name, I'm met with icy silence and an equally icy tone when they speak again, as if I'm just a fussy old curmudgeon. One even snapped, "That's your name, isn't it?"

My bank told me it had done a poll and found that "a vast majority prefer to be called by their first name." Call me suspicious, but I find that hard to believe. What about seniors? Even some of the clerks have admitted they don't like it either.

I have a theory: The much-higher-ups want their frontline people to speak to us as though we're friends because it shifts the power from us, the customers, to the clerks. When we have the power, they must serve us. When they have the power, we end up serving them. Does that sound paranoid? Perhaps. Furthermore, if these clerks – excuse me, associates – are our friends, we can trust them implicitly, right? They care about us like friends, don't you know. Do we really swallow this? It's so phoney, unbusinesslike and unprofessional. I am their customer, not their new-found pal.

Respect for strangers and elders has been a part of all civilizations since they began. Once a woman with a Filipino accent called from a charity, addressing me twice as Mr. Woolfrey, then correcting herself to say John. It was clear she was uncomfortable addressing me by my first name. That's not the way she was brought up. I suspect any polite person feels that way – which could explain why some clerks sound more respectful once they start addressing me by my last name, honorific and all.

John Woolfrey is a Montreal writer and translator.