



OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

# It's My Party, and You Have to Answer

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HERE'S an etiquette experiment for you: E-mail an invitation for a party, one month out, to 45 friends. Request an R.S.V.P. Provide a follow-up e-mail message, two weeks later, politely reminding them to get back to you.

How many will?

My experiment arose from plans for an evening of food, drink and literature, with readings by myself and two other writers, at a restaurant. Not exactly a drop-in-if-you're-around kind of thing, so I asked friends to R.S.V.P. My initial message brought in a dozen responses, and the follow-up a few more, but days before the event I had a paltry 23. Not 23 who planned to come, but 23 who had bothered to respond. Half my invitees had blown me off. Why? I wasn't peddling life insurance, after all.

Asking around, I discovered that the phenomenon is widespread. One friend of mine e-mailed invitations to a baby shower, and a third of the recipients failed to respond. Another announced a happy hour at her house and received a dozen yeses — only to find her party besieged by 35 people.

What's preventing us from executing this basic social task? Is it the medium? Do Evites somehow not feel like "real" invitations? Is it our busy lives, so overbooked and overwhelmed we've drawn up the castle gates? *Don't invite me out this month, I'm ensconced!* Or is it simple rudeness? Try as I might to understand, I kept feeling dissed.

What's clear is how hard the R.S.V.P. rubs against the grain of contemporary life. In requesting people to anchor a plan in the distant future of a month hence, you are demanding a kind of navigation that Americans increasingly do not practice. We prefer to remain flexy, solidifying our plans incrementally as the date approaches. *Let's talk tomorrow. I'll call you when I'm on the road.* Cellphones in hand, we microadjust our schedules as they unfold around us. We're like the air traffic controllers of our own lives.

It wasn't always so. A while ago I made a lunch date with an elderly couple. As the day approached with no subsequent corroboration, I felt a strange excitement. Would all three of us just show up? We did, and I realized that what I felt was a small nostalgic thrill over social arrangements that seemed straight out of Jane Austen.

But back to my party. The day before the big event, I sent a final e-mail message, thanking "the half of you who responded for helping keep the dying art of the R.S.V.P. alive." This irked missive flushed out a final 10 hangdog respondents. But there remained a gang of 12 — the dirty dozen, the truly hardcore, fanatical nonresponders — who couldn't even be shamed into R.S.V.P.ing.

In the end, perhaps they were merely following the French literally: Respond, if you please. Left over from a time when graciousness couched demands as requests, the R.S.V.P. no longer functions. I therefore propose an update, something still French but a bit more ... frank — the R.V.O.M.:

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Répondez Vite — ou Mourez!

For those friends of mine who plead a lack of high school French, allow me to translate.  
Respond Quickly, or Die!

Rand Richards Cooper writes the column "Dad on a Lark" for the Web site Wondertime.

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