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More Partythrowers Grow Impatient With Invitees Choosing Not to R.S.V.P.

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By [CHRISTINA DUFF](#) | Staff Reporter of [THE WALL STREET JOURNAL](#)

Banished to the dungeon for the socially inferior are those who commit unspeakable acts. He who parks illegally in handicap spots. She who litters.

And, increasingly, they who don't R.S.V.P.

"Staggering, the number of people who have no respect," says Memphis socialite Pat Kerr Tigrett, who once threw a sit-down dinner for 2,500. In the old days, everybody responded to R.S.V.P.'s. Now, she and her social set figure they are lucky to get a 75% return -- and that's among mannered people. Ms. Tigrett lumps non-R.S.V.P.'ers in the same crowd as the rubes who refuse to dress for the theater.

Diminishing Returns

Almost everyone agrees: If the R.S.V.P. were an investment these days, its return would be lousy. But is it right to condemn those who don't respond? Busier than ever and flooded with invitations of all kinds, invitees have a tough time committing. So even though the R.S.V.P. was intended as a polite directive, some see it as a control device. "It's like a subpoena," says David Murray, a Washington, D.C., research director and former anthropology professor.

In fact, some hosts are so aggressive with their R.S.V.P. demands as to be downright, well, inhospitable. Take partythrowers who not only include R.S.V.P. across the bottom of their invitations, but also toss in little mail-back response cards as well. Such hosts have gone from polite into "nagging and prodding," says etiquette umpire Judith Martin, a.k.a. Miss Manners, who doesn't mind R.S.V.P.'s but "abhors" the little response cards. Partygivers should wake up

and realize, she says, that there is "simply no recognition any more of hospitality as a social contract between guests and hosts."

Hosts say their desire is simple: They want the head count. Caterers need it. Seating charts require it. Too often, guests treat hosts' homes, parties and weddings like bars: drinks and eats provided if they feel like dropping by. Such ingrates don't have "that higher level of morality," says Helen Meldrum, an associate professor of communication and psychology at a Boston-area college.

Notes of the Times

This wasn't a problem in more genteel times. The swells who gave fancy parties sent out invitations, and polite society, without prompting, wrote back notes to say whether they were coming. About 25 years ago, that all started to change as people became a lot less formal and stopped writing letters. They couldn't be expected automatically to reply. So R.S.V.P. -- *repondez, s'il vous plait* -- started appearing on invitations.

For awhile, invitees actually seemed to take the R.S.V.P. seriously. But as its power has waned, R.S.V.P. users have grown more bold, even desperate.

Consider Jennifer Kish of Gilbert, Ariz., who with her husband throws three big bashes a year. After attracting only about a 50% response rate with pleas like "Regrets only" and "Call if you are coming," Ms. Kish, a violinist, pulled out all the stops on her latest invitation: "Please call me if you CAN make it. Do not use the excuse that you are too busy for a two-minute phone call."

Others, like Wendy Stern, a Washington, D.C. homemaker, not only hype their R.S.V.P.'s, but also add another layer of pressure to invitees by leaving fake-polite "just-calling-to-see" messages on their answering machines asking if they've gotten the invitation and plan to respond. On her guest list, R.S.V.P.'ers get stars by their names; chronic non-responders get red exclamation points.

Throwing Down a Challenge

If the pro-R.S.V.P. crowd seems a bit defensive, it's no wonder: They often find themselves treated like bill collectors, feared and avoided and dodged by invitees at work, the park, the school driveway.

They won't feel any better when they learn what **Dianne Blomberg**, a Denver college communications professor, feels about hosts who practically beg for a response. It's a cry for love and "shows a real lack of security," she says. "It means, 'I really don't have confidence you want to be with me, but come, please, everybody come. I'll just put on an extra omelet.' "

The proper response to the groveling R.S.V.P.? Throw the invitation away, says **Ms. Blomberg**. That's what she did right after receiving one that begged her to call "so I'll know what count to give the caterers. But if you forget and still want to attend please join us because there will be plenty of food."

It probably doesn't help that Americans are throwing more parties than ever. Beyond the flood of invitations for personal, charity and civic functions is an avalanche of "please respond" corporate invitations to events that are often far from exclusive. With this glut cheapening the currency, "the buyer can be choosy," says economist Joel Prakken of Macroeconomic Advisors in St. Louis. "One way to exercise that choosiness is not to respond."

The Boredom Effect

It probably also doesn't help that a lot of people throw boring parties and, worse, disguise potentially good ones with lousy invitations, says Joan Throckmorton, a Pound Ridge, N.Y., mailing consultant. Ms. Throckmorton, a member of the Direct Marketing Hall of Fame, is an advocate of thinking bold, starting with the envelope. "The bigger it is, the more impressive," she says. One recommendation: a 9-by-12-inch pouch, maybe the color of goldenrod (the knock-you-out yellow used for football jerseys).

Ms. Throckmorton also suggests adding a bit of seduction and tease to R.S.V.P.'s. She says she gets a nearly perfect response rate to the annual wine and classical-music parties she throws by adding the phrase, "Seats are limited" after the R.S.V.P. On the other hand, her parties also have a reputation, in the upstate New York social scene, for being fun. "Some poor people just don't do popular parties," Ms. Throckmorton says.

If a party is a guaranteed flop, why not just R.S.V.P. that you won't be there? Some think this is a country overrun with conflict-averse souls who can't stand telling someone what they don't want to hear. But many non-R.S.V.P.'ers also say it's simply too big a hassle, man.

Writing a note means digging up some stationery, preferably personal, and a stamp. You could leave a voice-mail message, but Peggy Post, author of "Emily Post's Etiquette 75th

Anniversary," says you still have to check back to see if it was received. That takes up a whole minute the non-R.S.V.P.'er could spend surfing each and every cable channel.

Besides, it's up to the host to be the Boy Scout who is always prepared. Caterer Lyn Pellegrini of Art of the Party in Cambridge, Mass., was told 320 had R.S.V.P.'ed for a friend's wedding. Then 341 showed up. Maybe no one noticed: She split the grilled quails in half and put them on a bed of lettuce.

At some point, of course, non-R.S.V.P.'ers have to throw their own parties. Take Diana Blitz, a Washington, D.C., math teacher who has "trouble returning a phone call for dinner on a Saturday night." Between kids and jobs, she says, R.S.V.P.'ing "is a low priority."

But now it is her son's bar mitzvah, and Ms. Blitz has invited about 130 people. No one in her ex-husband's family has responded. She ran into a couple of friends who offered only, "Oh yeah, I think we're coming." She got a response card signed, "I will attend" -- no name or address.

Suddenly, she's become missionary about R.S.V.P.'ing, firing off "I-need-to-know" e-mail and phone messages.

"It's imperative," she says. "I have a seating chart."