CIVILITY IN AMERICA

A NATIONWIDE STUDY

Is Civility on the Decline in America?

Are Americans becoming less civil in the way they communicate with each other? And is the increasingly impersonal way people tend to communicate with one another today – via email, posting online and texting – somehow contributing to this escalation in incivility?

According to a new, in-depth survey of more than 1,000 U.S. adults conducted by Weber Shandwick and Powell Tate in partnership with KRC Research, an overwhelming majority of Americans view the erosion of civility in human interaction today as a major problem, and feel the distressing situation has only been made worse by the recession. Among the many signs pointing to this steady decline are the daily occurrences of cyber bullying, online "flaming" and nasty blog comments, the venomous bickering taking place on some reality TV shows and between TV news personalities and their guests, and the mean-spirited mudslinging among politicians and their loyal supporters. Weber Shandwick Chairman Jack Leslie said, "Freedom of expression is the bedrock of our society. Conflicting points of view are always welcome but too much incivility in the public square can turn people away from voicing their opinions."
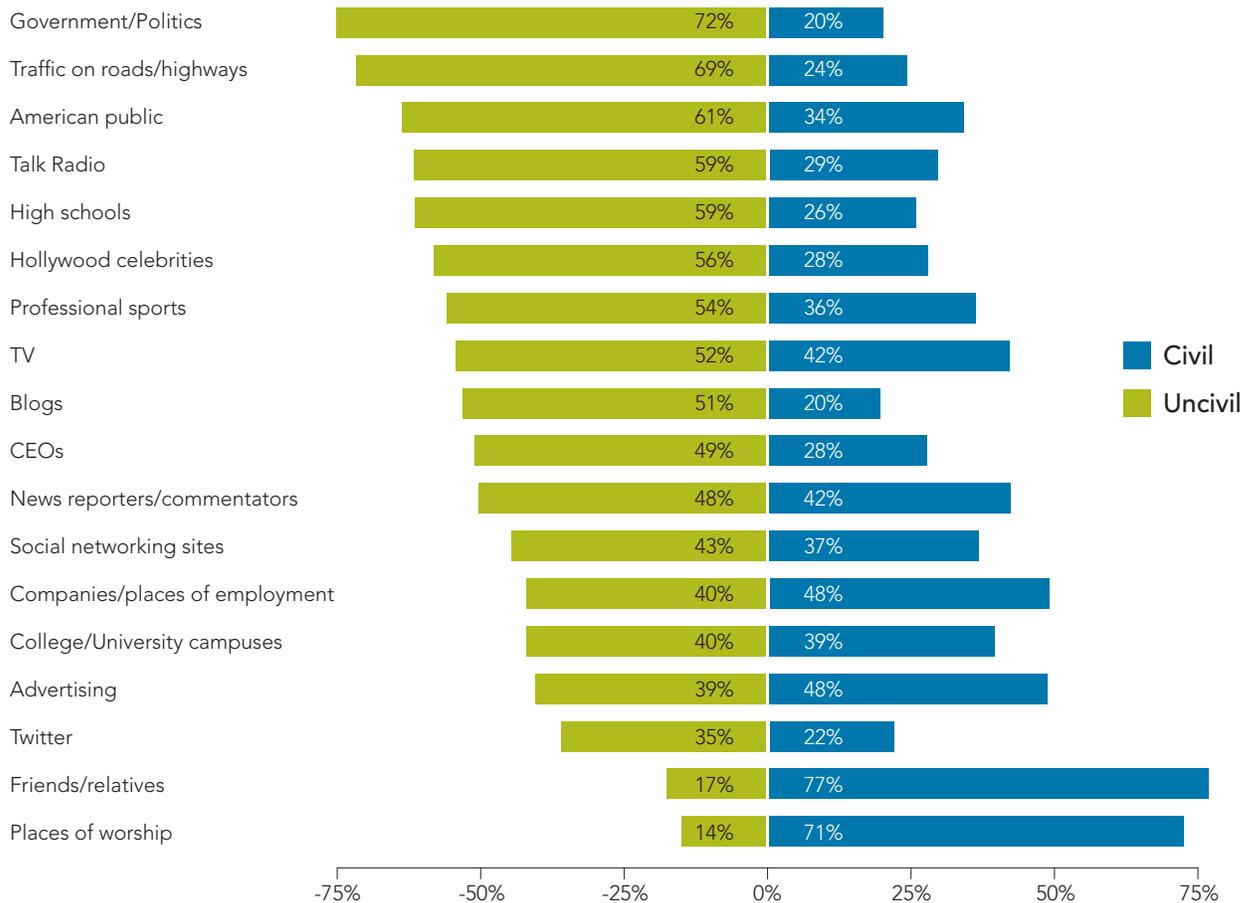
This trend of escalating incivility has not gone unnoticed. A growing proliferation of incivility on the Internet led to the launch of CiviliNation, a global non-profit focused on communicating and engaging online in a responsible and accountable way. The growing "wild west" nature of social media channels has caused many participants to back away sharply from their use of the medium or migrate to safer, closed networks. Even President Obama has acknowledged the growing incivility in politics, stating "[Incivility] poisons the well of public opinion. It leaves each side little room to negotiate with the other. It makes politics an all-or-nothing sport where one side is either always right or always wrong, when, in reality, neither side has a monopoly on truth."

Conducted in late April 2010, the survey explores how civility is affecting Americans' views and participation in social media, politics and media, as well as their buying behaviors. Among many interesting findings, the survey found:
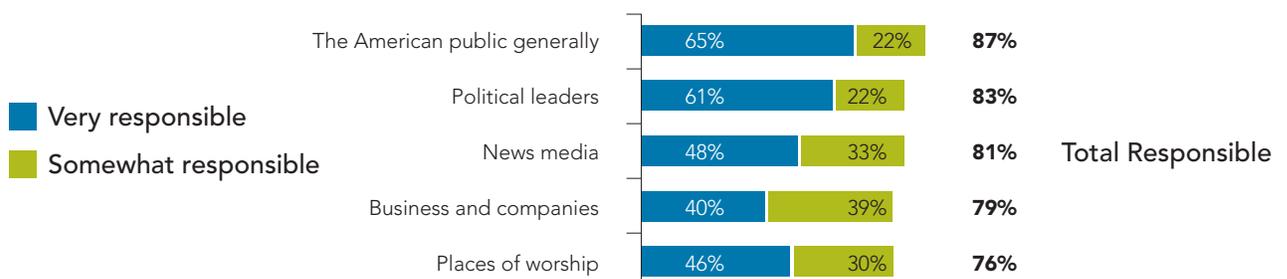
Civility in America is A Growing Problem

★ 94% of all Americans consider the general tone and level of civility in the country today to be a problem, with approximately two-thirds believing it is a "major" problem (65%).

★ Most Americans believe that civility has worsened in the past few years (72%) with the financial crisis and recession hastening erosion.

★ Americans consider government/politics and our roads as the most uncivil aspects of our society. Roughly seven in 10 Americans perceive these to be uncivil (72% and 69%, respectively). Conversely, they view friends and family (77%) and places of worship (71%) as sanctuaries of civility.

How would you describe the general tone and level of civility in each of the areas listed below?

Area	Uncivil	Civil
Government/Politics	72%	20%
Traffic on roads/highways	69%	24%
American public	61%	34%
Talk Radio	59%	29%
High schools	59%	26%
Hollywood celebrities	56%	28%
Professional sports	54%	36%
TV	52%	42%
Blogs	51%	20%
CEOs	49%	28%
News reporters/commentators	48%	42%
Social networking sites	43%	37%
Companies/places of employment	40%	48%
College/University campuses	40%	39%
Advertising	39%	48%
Twitter	35%	22%
Friends/relatives	17%	77%
Places of worship	14%	71%

Civil
Uncivil

-75%   -50%   -25%   0%   25%   50%   75%

★ When asked who is responsible for improving civility, 87% of Americans indicated that this responsibility falls on the shoulders of the general public itself, although they also pointed to other sources of leadership and influence…

To what extent is each of the following responsible for improving civility in America?

Very responsible
Somewhat responsible

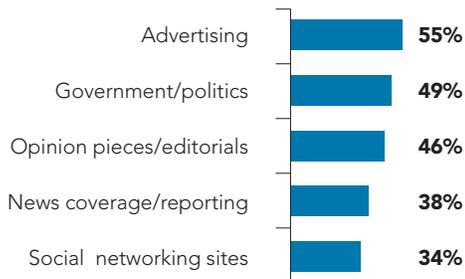|	Very responsible	Somewhat responsible	Total Responsible
The American public generally	65%	22%	87%
Political leaders	61%	22%	83%
News media	48%	33%	81%
Business and companies	40%	39%	79%
Places of worship	46%	30%	76%

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Incivility is Tuning Americans Out

The tone of civility is causing Americans to tune out from the most fundamental elements of our democracy -- government and politics, news coverage and reporting, and opinion pieces and editorials in newspapers and magazines. Interestingly, discourteous speech on social media networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn is less of a factor in causing citizens to "tune out" relative to government and media.
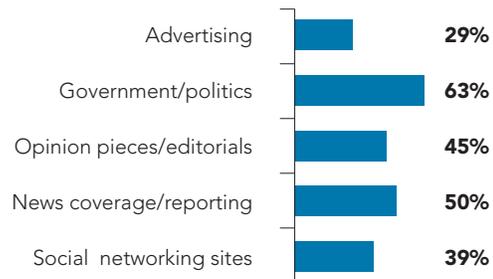
In general, do you find yourself "tuning in" or "tuning out" each of the following?

% Tuning out

Advertising	55%
Government/politics	49%
Opinion pieces/editorials	46%
News coverage/reporting	38%
Social networking sites	34%

THOSE WHO TUNE OUT: How big a factor is the general tone and level of civility in your "tuning out"?

% A major factor

Advertising	29%
Government/politics	63%
Opinion pieces/editorials	45%
News coverage/reporting	50%
Social networking sites	39%

Accountability Stretches Far and Wide

Americans are in near universal agreement that civility begins at home. The primary responsibility for courteous speech and behavior lies with parents who, according to respondents, should start teaching their children about appropriate discourse early on.

Business leaders also have considerable influence, since they are expected to set an example for behaving civilly. Nearly every American (91%) believes that business leaders should set an example for behaving with civility. Not only are business leaders expected to act with civility, but the majority (82%) believe that companies should not tolerate uncivil behavior in the workplace.

More than eight in 10 Americans agree that they should not vote for uncivil politicians or candidates. As the mid-term elections arrive in November, it will be interesting to see how politicians change their tune and tone with the American public.

To What Extent Do You Agree That...	% Completely/Mostly Agree
Parents should teach their children the importance of civility from an early age.	93%
Business leaders should set an example and be careful to always behave with civility.	91%
People should not vote for political candidates and politicians who are uncivil.	83%
Companies should have a "zero tolerance" policy for uncivil behavior in the workplace.	82%
Companies should not advertise on programs or on websites that have a lot of uncivil behavior.	75%
People should stop buying products from companies that are uncivil.	75%
People should refuse to watch or listen to news commentators who are uncivil.	73%
Social media and internet sites should block or remove uncivil comments.	63%
Companies that use uncivil advertising should be fined.	63%
We should have a universal "shame on you" icon that people should use anytime they see an uncivil comment on-line.	59%

Social Media Should Take More Responsibility for Civility: Blogs More Uncivil than Social Networks and Twitter

Unfortunately, the high degree of anonymity afforded people on the Internet has made the online world a breeding ground for rude, mean-spirited and hateful behavior. John Temple, editor of Peer News, has said that anonymity on the Internet had so reduced responsibility that comments sections have been dominated by "racism, hate, ugliness" and "reflect badly on news organizations that have them." With online incivility becoming a growing issue on the Web (mentions of "online incivility" grew 63% from 2008 to 2009 in a Google search), it could become a far more serious business problem if not addressed. President of Digital Communications at Weber Shandwick, Chris Perry, adds, "As a tool that nearly all companies are utilizing to grow and compete effectively, businesses cannot afford to ignore an environment that may make consumers more hesitant to research their brands and shop online."

★ In social media, blogs are considered more uncivil than social networking sites and Twitter by Americans (51% vs. 43% vs. 35%, respectively). Perhaps it is the large number of political blogs that are often referenced by the mass media. Or because there is safety in networks – users know who is reading their posts and viewing their pictures because they have chosen these people to be their friends and followers. Blogs are mostly open terrain – practically anyone can comment to a post and even form a virtual demonstration against a blogger's views, often anonymously.

★ Considering that many organizations are increasingly relying upon social networks as effective customer touch points, it is concerning that a large segment of one-third (34%) of respondents report that they are "tuning out" of social networking sites, and 39% of them attribute their tune-out to rude discourse and behavior. Among the ways they are tuning out are...

– 45% have defriended or blocked someone online because of uncivil comments or behavior
– 38% stopped visiting an online site because of its incivility
– 25% dropped out of a fan club or online community because it had become uncivil

★ As the issue of incivility continues to attract public attention, companies should recognize that they have an opportunity to design more hospitable social networks that pull consumers towards them instead of pushing them away. Online remedies that companies can deploy on their web sites are:

– Blocking or removing uncivil comments from social media and Internet sites (63% of American adults liked this idea)
– Using a universal "shame on you" icon for uncivil online comments (59% liked this idea)

★ Many sites are already addressing the incivility issue and provide guidelines on how to stem mounting criticism about how people converse online. For instance…

– Anonymity is discouraged by some sites
– Some sites let readers rank the reputation of blog comment writers
– Gawker.com, a blog focusing on celebrity and media industry gossip, instituted a system that gives preferred placements for comments from people who get high marks among the site's readers and editors
– Peer News, a new site by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar, refuses comments entirely
– Some media outlets permit comments but filter them to give readers control over which ones they see. *The Wall Street Journal*'s web site gives readers the option of seeing only comments from paying subscribers. *The Washington Post* announced it soon will rank "trusted commentators" based on their complying with guidelines and using real names. Readers will be able to access comments from less trusted commentators, but only if they click further to do so.

With social media still in its infancy and optimistic projections for its enormous influence on buying behavior and information sharing, organizations can't afford to alienate those who try to engage with them online. Social media sites should consider new ways to make their online communities feel safe and secure from overt rudeness and harassment.

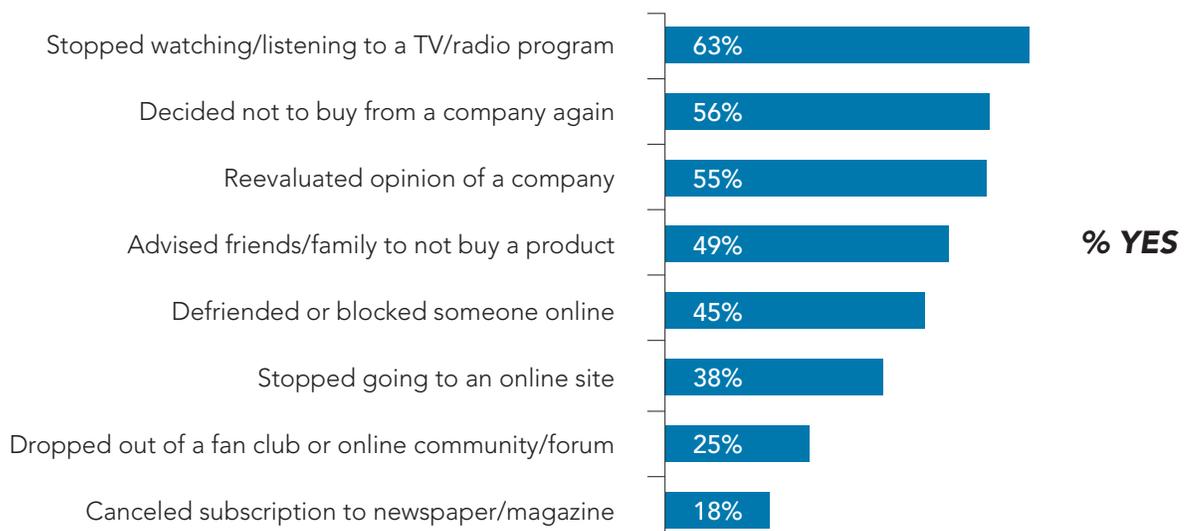## What are the Business Implications for Incivility?

Weber Shandwick and its research partners understand that social media is still finding its way as a mainstream communications channel and enthusiastically support its phenomenal growth and success. "However, with opportunity comes responsibility," said Perry. We recommend the following potential solutions to calming the waters of incivility – both online and offline.

★ **CEOs Have to Be More Accountable.** Companies can take a larger role in restoring civility. Not only because it's good for their businesses, but also because Americans see CEOs as part of the problem and, consequently, a big part of the solution. Americans rate civility among company CEOs fairly low -- only 28% regard CEOs as civil while 49% consider them uncivil. This is not surprising considering that perceptions surrounding the financial crisis and recession are closely tied to CEO behavior on Wall Street. In a previous Weber Shandwick and KRC Research survey, only 14% of consumers rated CEOs positively. Additionally, recent parades of CEOs to Congressional hearings have heightened Americans' sense that business leaders are deflecting responsibility for the recent economic turmoil. Nearly eight in 10 Americans (79%) hold businesses and companies responsible for improving civility in society.

★ **Tame Your Badvocates.** A full three-quarters (75%) of Americans believe that companies that are uncivil should be boycotted. Additionally, the most networked of social network participants (those who belong to four or more networks and comprise 10% of our respondents) are much more likely than average Americans to believe that people should boycott uncivil companies (83% vs. 75%). These highly influential individuals who can efficiently detract or badvocate about brands through their vast social networks are threats to competitiveness and companies should pay heed. In fact, 64% of these online influentials report that they have advised others not to buy products or services because they felt the company or its representatives were rude or uncivil.

★ **Social Media Has a Role to Play.** Social media, with the exception of blogging, fares well compared to other sources of incivility online. Clear codes of conduct and civil engagement guidelines from the social media sector could positively influence discourse. Social media sites could reinforce neutral or polite conversation and shun overly discourteous commenting or responses. Several social media or word-of-mouth organizations could take the lead towards setting standards.

Have you ever ... because of lack of civility?

	% YES
Stopped watching/listening to a TV/radio program	63%
Decided not to buy from a company again	56%
Reevaluated opinion of a company	55%
Advised friends/family to not buy a product	49%
Defriended or blocked someone online	45%
Stopped going to an online site	38%
Dropped out of a fan club or online community/forum	25%
Canceled subscription to newspaper/magazine	18%

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★ **The Media Industry Needs to Act.** News organizations, television, and talk radio are losing their audiences as rudeness and abusive conversations continue. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of Americans report that they ceased watching a TV program or listening to a radio program because of its uncivil tone. And incivility in the media is not limited to broadcast. Although incivility is tolerated more in newspapers and magazines, nearly one in five (18%) canceled a newspaper or magazine subscription because of uncivil content. The media should heed these warning signs if they want to continue providing platforms that encourage and nurture informed discourse and credible opinion.

★ **Advertising May Be a Viable Bargaining Chip.** A sizeable segment of Americans believe that companies can make a positive impact through their ad content and/or media buys. Conversely, they believe companies that demonstrate or encourage incivility should be penalized. For example, 63% agree that companies with uncivil advertising should be fined, and 75% of Americans agree that companies should withhold advertisements from programs or Web sites that promote uncivil behavior.

Weber Shandwick regularly conducts research on topical communications issues impacting companies and organizations and the constituents they serve. We then leverage these findings to further inform the strategies we develop to address our clients' most pressing communications challenges. As public discourse and social networking play an ever-increasing role in the way people learn about and interact with the world around them, negative consumer sentiment toward incivility underscores how important it is for companies and institutions to manage their communications effectively and in a holistic way.   "At Weber Shandwick, we believe everyone is best served when organizations seek to expand channels of communication rather than narrow them, and communicate across all channels in a way that encourages the respectful sharing of differing points-of-view," said Leslie. In an era where transparency, tolerance and openness are essential building blocks to advancing corporate reputation, the way an organization communicates and interacts with its stakeholders, has become just as important as the ways in which it acts.