Nice Ways to Say No
How to bow out—tactfully—of what you can’t, won’t or shouldn’t do.
Jo Coudert

Paul Newman, dining with a friend in a restaurant, was approached by a man who asked for his autograph. “Sorry, but that’s not something I do,” said Newman politely but firmly. Then he turned back to his interrupted conversation.

A week after I read of this small exchange, I received in the mail several books of raffle tickets, along with a request to sell them for the benefit of a local charity.

I promptly returned the tickets with a small donation and a note saying, “Sorry, but this isn’t something I do.” As I sealed the envelope I blessed Mr. Newman for providing me with a way of saying no that was neutral and inarguable, yet perfectly pleasant. I hadn’t explained. I hadn’t made excuses. I hadn’t bought the tickets myself. I’d simply said no.

That isn’t always easy to do, especially for women. We’re brought up to be agreeable and obliging, to put other people’s needs and wishes first. Children, husbands, parents, bosses, colleagues, friends, volunteer groups—all weigh in with demands. We try to meet them, never mind the cost to our own time and tranquility. It seldom occurs to use to refuse.

It didn’t occur to me until I came upon the comments of a participant in a support group for breast cancer patients. “It’s almost worth having the disease,” she said, “to learn that I can say no—to demands that sap my energy, to things my children and husband can do for themselves, to fancied obligations. I’m living my own life now, saying yes only when I want to, only when it makes sense for me.”

That should be the prerogative of everyone, but many of us have to endure a serious illness before we gather the courage to stick up for ourselves. Saying no often seems harsh or rejecting or unkind. But there are nice ways of turning people down without turning them off. Paul Newman’s useful phrase is just one example. Whenever you’d really like to say no, try one of the following strategies:

**I’m so glad you asked.** Bird photographer Laura Riley’s strategy for saying to is to begin with a compliment. If, for example, she’s too busy to present a requested slide show, she writes: “I know that your group would be one of the most responsive and interested of audiences. It is with real regret, therefore, that I must decline your kind invitation.” When asked to serve on a committee or board, she softens her refusal by saying: “I’m so glad you asked. I really admire your organization and the work you’re doing, but my schedule just won’t allow me to accept your offer.”

The same approach works socially. Start with: “There’s no one I’d rather have lunch with,” when turning down a date. Or: “Jim and I always have a wonderful time at your parties, so I’m really sorry we can’t make it.” And in business: “You’re such a fair boss that I know you wouldn’t assign this if I didn’t think I could handle it, but I’m really overloaded.”

**That’s an excellent offer.** You might not think a marine would be concerned about saying no in a pleasant way, but a supply officer who is told me his favorite phrases are: “That’s an excellent offer, but we’re not in a position to take advantage of it right now,” and “That’s a good idea, but I’m afraid we have to pass on it for the time being.” Phrasing your turndown in a positive fashion usually avoids hurt feelings. Adding “right now” or “for the time being” also helps by leaving the door open a little.

Accentuating the positive has even been known to work on muggers. A few months ago a Good Shepherd nun was carrying paychecks for the workers in a halfway house in a poor area of the Bronx when a knife-wielding man snarled, “Gimme your purse.” Sister Anne tucked the purse into the crook of her arm as though it were a football. “Young man, from now on you’ll have my prayers,” she told him resolutely, “but you cannot have my pocketbook.” The mugger looked startled, then slunk off.

“**Let me think about it.**” Teacher Carolyn Pordes admits that she used to make a mess out of trying to say no. She hemmed, she hawed, she got halfway through one excuse, shifted to another, then tangled herself in a third until she was ready to burst into tears.

Then a therapist made a simple observation: “Very seldom do you have to give a yes or no answer on the spot.” The therapist suggested she allow herself time to get in touch with her feelings by saying: “Let me think about it,” or “Can I get back to you on that?” or “I don’t have my calendar here. May I let you know later?”

This, of course, has long been the classic tactic of married couples. “I’ll have Mary call you back,” says the husband. “Let me see if Dan has any plans for that weekend,” says the wife. The maneuver buys time until you can come up with an acceptable excuse.

If you prefer to soften your no, try: “I’d love to say yes, but I can’t right off the bat. Give me some time to see if I can work something out.”

“**Do you mind checks that bounce?**” A determined fund-raiser for a museum called me. “I’m putting you down for one hundred dollars,” she announced in a voice intended to cut off discussion. “That’s quite a put-down,” I said mildly. It wasn’t a great joke, but she laughed. “I don’t object to the amount,” I added, “unless you object to

checks that bounce.” She chuckled and we agreed on a smaller figure.

Humor, if you can manage it, is a fine way of saying no. I once heard an employee assure his store manager, “I think you’re a good boss—even if you do ask the impossible.” It takes a light touch to get away with such lines, but those who have it can risk phrases like: “I have a great reason for saying no. As soon as I think of it, I’ll let you know.”

Children love jokes. If you can get your kids laughing, they’ll readily take no for an answer. The mother of three youngsters loved to ask, “Why did the chicken cross the road?” turned the tables when they nagged her to take them to the movies on a frantic day.

“Why did the chicken stop in the middle of the road?” she asked.

“Why? Why?”

“Because she decided to lay it on the line.” When the children stopped giggling, she added, “Now I’m going to lay it on the line. The answer is no. No movie. Not today.” Moments later, the children were involved in a game.

Children are amused (as we all are) by the unexpected twist. For example: “I suppose you think I say no just because I’m mean. Well, it’s true.”

“It just won’t work for us.” When a neighbor said, “We have a guest coming next week, and I’m sure she’d enjoy seeing your garden,” I replied, “Bring her for a drink on Friday.” June, the neighbor’s wife, called later. “About Friday,” she said, “it just won’t work for us.”

She said it so matter-of-factly that it didn’t cross my mind until later that she hadn’t given any reason. Then I remembered Winston Churchill’s dictum, “Never explain. Never apologize.”

Unless your excuse is controvertible, it’s often best to give none at all. Simply use an enigmatic phrase like: “I just can’t fit it in right now.”

Most people will not press for an explanation. In the rare instance when you’re questioned, just say, “I’m afraid I have to let it go at that.” Or borrow Cornelia Otis Skinner’s phrase: “I leave it to you to draw your own confusions.”

“I hear you.” In my youth, I worked as assistant to the director of a Broadway musical. I kept coming up with great ideas for improving the show. Vincent listened, then invariable said, “I hear you.” Never “No” or “It won’t work,” only that neutral phrase: “I hear you.”

It’s a good way of handling suggestions or complaints. It acknowledges the person and what’s been said without committing yourself to a reaction. “You may be right” and “That’s an interesting point” are others that allow you to sidestep a negative reply. This approach can be particularly effective with children. “I hear you—you don’t want to leave the playground because you’re having so much fun,” is a lot nicer than “No, you can’t stay another minute.”

Psychotherapist Laura Aversano of New York’s Maria Droste Counseling Service suggests telling a child: “If I say yes, it wouldn’t be good for you, so I have to say no.”

“I’m sorry you’re having that problem.” Sometimes the hardest person to say no to is the one who merely hints around and sighs. For example, the out-of-town friend who mentions that, “David has to be in your city on business. If only hotels weren’t so expensive, I could come with him... (sigh). There are two strategies here: The first is to say, sympathetically but firmly: “Gee, I’m sorry you have that problem, then come to a complete stop. You don’t have to be a rescuer. I’ve finally learned to tell a young relative, “Hey, that’s tough. I hope you can find an answer.”

The second strategy is to bring the concealed question into the open. “If you’re asking whether we can put you up, I’m afraid we don’t have room.”

When emotional blackmail is used to make you say yes, try responding to only half of what the person says. For instance, to a mother who says, “If you cared about me, you wouldn’t make me spend Sunday alone,” comment only on the first phrase. You might ask: “How long have you been telling yourself that I don’t care about you?” As any coach can tell you, you can’t score on defense. This strategy lets you take the offensive.

“The answer is no.” At times the best way to say no is to simply say it. I asked Dee-Dee and Cornelius Gallagher, the parents of seven, how they handled the problem of saying no when their children were small. They seemed surprised by the question. “When it mattered, we just said no.”

NO.

A busy chief executive is also a fan of the unadorned no. “A clear no prevents misunderstandings,” he said, “and keeps people from going off in wrong directions and wasting time.”

Remember, you always have the right to say no. No matter how you choose to say it, you have the right to protect your own time and interests and assets. And you are seldom obliged to explain. Saying no is not rude. It’s a matter of respecting your own wishes.