

Gentle hints

For not-so-gentle people

Your co-workers' bad breath, body odor and relentless talking can be handled with help from some enterprising sources

By **MICHAEL PRECKER**
The Dallas Morning News

For years, Anne Ford and her pals compared notes about bosses, co-workers and friends who needed to be told about their bad breath, dandruff or other unfortunate syndromes.

"Each time we found ourselves saying, 'I wish someone would tell them,'" she says. "But there was never a someone."

Now Ford, a Los Angeles businesswoman, is everybody's someone.

For \$7.95 in most cases, she'll dispatch a kind-but-direct letter to the source of the problem, with suggestions, a small gift — and no hint about who's behind it all.

"We want to preserve their dignity," she says. "We do not want to ridicule or embarrass anybody. If you want a mean-spirited gesture, it's really going to backfire, because there's nothing mean-spirited about the letters."

At the same time, there are issues to discuss. So every letter begins, "Someone who cares about you and doesn't want to hurt your feelings wants you to know"

The online business, gentlehints.com —

<http://www.gentlehints.com/> — started this fall with nine categories: bad breath, body odor, dandruff, greasy hair, ear and nose hair, facial

hair (for women), flatulence, talking too much and interrupting.

The bad-breath letter suggests getting your teeth cleaned, while the chatterbox letter urges you to practice being a good listener. And like Cracker Jack, there's always a prize inside.

"It's a very carefully worded letter, but we were fairly certain that somebody getting an envelope containing an enclosure would have a harder time tossing it," Ford says. "And it serves to reinforce the message."

The gifts include soap, mouthwash, shampoo, deodorant and tweezers. Most of the applications are obvious, but you might not guess what the excessive talkers receive: a three-minute egg timer.

"As you watch the sand passing from the top to the bottom, you will become aware of the length of time you are spending on your story," notes the accompanying letter.

Ford says she has received plenty of suggestions to expand the repertoire, not all of them practical. "One woman wrote to us and said her co-worker smacks her gum all day," she says. "But what do you send them?"

But four ideas have already been added: wearing too much cologne or perfume, not covering your mouth when you cough or sneeze, not washing your hands in the bathroom and plain old table manners.

"You can't believe the avalanche of e-mails from people griping about table manners," she says.

Uncouth eaters receive Tiffany's Table Manners Book, but that will cost the complainer \$14.95. The only other higher-priced letter is for nose hair, also \$14.95, which addresses the problem with a little electric trimmer.

Ford says she would resist temptation to increase profits by selling the recipient the name of the sender. Not only has nobody asked, she says, but the bad-smelling, flaky, too-hairy people out there seem to be grateful.

"The ones who contact me have all said, 'I was a bit taken aback, but once I got over wondering who sent this to me and got less defensive, I thought perhaps I do have a problem and I'm glad someone took the time.'"

About 100 requests come in each day. These are the current leaders: bad breath, followed by talking too much and body odor.



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