

Tips for More Effective E-mail

By David Friedman

E-mail communications will be much easier if you follow these helpful tips

A recent report estimated that over 7 trillion e-mails were sent worldwide last year! Spam messages are jamming in-boxes across the globe, and the average office worker now gets between 60 and 200 messages a day.

While no one denies the obvious productivity gains from the efficiencies of e-mail communication, many people find themselves drowning in all these messages. Here are eight tips that will make your e-mail communications more effective.

Practice being clear and concise with your message

You'll save time and your reader will appreciate it.

- Consider using bulleted points to clearly express your thoughts.
- Everyone has a different style of how they take in information.
- E-mail communication works best if you clearly outline the points you're trying to get across in an easy-to-understand format.

Investing extra time while authoring an e-mail pays big dividends by giving your reader a clear understanding of your message. Remember, if your e-mail is written with the purpose to educate, inform, or persuade, then making sure to get your point across is even more critical.

With the sheer volume of e-mail messages most business people receive, there's an inverse relationship between the volume of text and successfully making the point. Most people will immediately read and understand a 10-sentence e-mail. Send them a 10,000-word document and they'll likely scan the highlights and save it for later. You risk not having it read fully. People appreciate brevity. Remember, if your objective is to tell the reader what time it is, you don't need to explain how to build a clock!

Before sending, always re-read your message and double check for grammar and misused words

It's obvious to most people to use spell check after composing a message. You should also make it standard procedure to re-read your entire message before sending. Oftentimes, you'll notice words that have been left out, grammar that's incorrect, and—worst of all—words “witch our spilled write butt knot used inn the write weigh”. (Note that the last sentence runs through a spell checker perfectly.) How many times have you caught something too late, making your only option to curse at your spell-checking software!

Copy back salient points when replying to an earlier message

Most people receive hundreds of e-mails every week. When you combine that with face-to-face meetings and phone calls, it's dangerous to assume your recipient will remember your earlier exchange. Which of these messages has the greater chance for reader confusion?

"Sure, sounds fine... Please proceed."

Or: **You wrote:** Hi Jody, Are you okay with the proposed color scheme on the new brochure? I'd like to print it next week.

"Sure, sounds fine... Please proceed."

It's frustrating when someone sends you an e-mail with a specific answer but

you're unable to recall the original issue. This problem is largely avoidable by copying a portion of the original message alluding to the context.

Use specific subject line descriptions

Since many e-mail messages go back and forth several times over the course of many weeks, it's important to accurately describe what the reader will find inside. Considering the level of spam and anti-spam software in place today, you can't afford to risk your message not being delivered because of a generic or poorly worded subject line. A subject line such as, "What do you think" doesn't tell the recipient much. "Need your suggestions for options re: acct#45619—Robinson Inc." is more specific. Remember, a legitimate message coming from a plant in Hong Kong advising you that "they've still had no luck increasing the prototype by 3 inches" is unlikely to ever make it past today's spam filters!

Realize that once your message is sent, there's no getting it back

E-mail communication in the workplace has been around about 10 years. Before the '90s, if you composed a letter later deemed too harsh or in poor taste, there were more steps involved before the message was sent. Today, the stakes are much higher. People can literally ruin their careers with a 60-second lapse in judgment by sending the wrong message to someone.

E-mail is also ridiculously easy to edit and forward. Keep in mind that a message sent to one person can eventually be viewed by many other unintended parties. Always double-check the recipient line before sending any e-mail. Horror stories about messages accidentally copied to "all" are becoming routine.

As a rule, it's a good idea to never put anything in writing that a reasonable person would consider confidential or dangerous. If your situation dictates that you e-mail such information, try to word your message in as factual and balanced a way as possible. As you write, imagine that the person you're writing about eventually sees your message. Stick to facts, not opinions.

Practice the 24-hour rule when you're upset

It's never a good idea to send an e-mail when you're angry. We've all been guilty of this. In the heat of the moment you type a literary bombast, a message that will reduce the recipient to mush. You even reread it and are actually sort of proud at how powerful the wording is. You imagine the recipient opening and cringing as he/she reads your words. Then you send it.

Only later, after you calm down, you revisit the message and realize that you dramatically overreacted. But it's too late to do anything except apologize and try to mend fences. This is more common than you think.

If you compose an e-mail in anger, wait a predetermined period of time before sending it. If your emotions are legit, then your issue will still be there tomorrow. But in 95 percent of the cases, you'll be glad you waited and toned things down after you've gained the perspective that can only come with some additional time.

Avoid sh-cuts and abbr. in biz e-mail msgs

Anyone with a teenager knows you practically need a CIA decoder chart to understand the abbreviations and shortcuts popular in e-mail, pagers, text messages, and instant messages. These cutesy shortcuts and misspellings are ill advised to use in any corporate context, no matter if your customer is external or internal. Even common shortcuts like LOL (laughing out loud), BRB (be right back), 2 (to), and u r (you are) are simply too casual for most business communication. What's hip to the sender can be flip and disrespectful to the reader. Since a casual message to a co-worker could easily be forwarded, it's best to practice the same high level of professionalism no matter who you're writing to.

Don't Forward Viral Messages

What's that you say? You'd only forward important messages on to your co-workers and friends? Not so fast. Unlike obvious computer viruses that involve actual destructive codes, many messages are viral in nature in that they are purposefully crafted so you'll send them on to friends with the idea that you weren't positive if this was real but wanted to be sure they saw it just in case! Although not usually harmful, these e-mails prey on normally smart individuals' desire to inform others.

Every day, intelligent people who would never consider themselves gullible forward on hoax messages about:

- Pending Congressional taxes on e-mails
- Avoiding waking up in a hotel bathtub of ice—minus your kidneys
- Easy steps for getting some of Bill Gates/Disney/AOL's money
- How to delete viruses from your PC (which are actually legit Windows files your system needs)
- Child abductions at giant retailers
- A widow from Zimbabwe begging you to look after her \$18 million if you'll just give her your bank account number.

The list goes on. If you are the recipient of an e-mail message you think is relevant to your friends and family, run it by this test: Copy and paste a few words from the message into google.com along with the word "hoax." If the returns come back showing articles claiming the message is a fake, save everyone in your address book some time by hitting the delete key! The same rule applies to jokes and pictures that would be deemed as inappropriate by your employer.

While there may not be a silver bullet that saves us from an onslaught of never-ending messages, common sense practices can make our business e-mail correspondence more effective and productive every working day. ■

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