

## *Email Etiquette – What Is It and Why Is It So Important*

It's amazing to find in this day of computer technology, and internet communication, that some companies still have not realized just how important their email communications are; even though they have come to accept email as the standard way of communicating within their organization, with their customers, and potential customers.

In the business world, the formality of an email message tends to vary, between the semi-formal approach that was dominant with the "inter-office memo," down to the chatty exchanges that you might have with someone over the phone or while standing next to the coffee machine.

Email messages are surprisingly permanent, take a good look through the contents of your Inbox and you just might be surprised to see just how old some of these messages are. Would you have kept a paper inter-office memo or letter of inquiry for that long? Probably not. The really worrying part of this is that most people give very little thought to the content of an email message, even though it might linger around for years.

It is the normal day-to-day email messages that can often cause the most problems with offhand remarks, unguarded comments, and careless wording.

The main problem with email messages is "*missed signals*," the written email message doesn't have the facial expression or gestures that you would get with a face-to-face discussion, and there is no tone of voice to interpret like you would also have over the telephone. A great deal of "human communication" comes from these non-verbal signals and have traditionally helped make a message more clear, and can allow us to make judgments about a person's motives and intentions.

If you are able to deal with email in a professional manner, you will provide yourself and/or your company with a competitive edge. Furthermore, by educating your employees (and perhaps even your customers/clients) as to what can and cannot be said in an email, you will be protecting yourself and them from awkward situations.

### **Why do you need email etiquette?**

A company needs to implement etiquette rules for the following three reasons:

- Professionalism: by using proper email language your company will convey a professional image
- Efficiency: emails that get to the point are much more effective than poorly worded emails
- Protection from awkward situations: employee awareness of email risks will protect your company from costly law suits

### **What are the etiquette rules?**

If you search the internet you will find many etiquette guides and many different etiquette rules, these rules will differ according to the nature of your business. Below is a list of some of the more important etiquette rules, and why they are important; these will apply to nearly everyone in the business world.

- Be concise and to the point - don't make an email longer than it needs to be. Remember that reading an email is harder than reading printed communications.
- Answer all questions, and pre-empt further questions - if you fail to answer all the questions in

the original email, you will receive further emails regarding the unanswered questions. This will not only waste your time and your customer's time but will cause considerable frustration and

perhaps give the impression that you do not know the answer to the question or that you are not concerned with the problem that the customer is having.

- Use proper spelling - use your spell checker. It's annoying to receive constant spelling mistakes
- Use proper punctuation - it's hard to read stuff that doesn't have any commas, capital letters, periods or apostrophes.
- Use proper grammar - don't use shorthand. Stuff like "r u going to stop by later" can be hard to read. Don't be lazy, type the whole word.
- Make it personal - a printed communication always starts with "Dear" someone; while "Dear" in an email is perhaps a bit formal, try "Hello" someone (if it's a person that you don't know) or "Hi" someone (for a person that you already have an established relationship with).
- Use templates for frequently used responses - some questions you get over and over again. Save these responses as templates or drafts and paste them into your messages when you need them.
- Answer promptly - customers or potential customers send an email because they desire a quick response. Each email should be answered within 24 hours, preferably within the same business day. If the email is complicated, acknowledge that you have received it, and that you will respond within a specified time frame.
- Do not attach unnecessary files - remember, attachments over 50k are annoyingly long to download, possibly causing your recipient's connection to "time-out" or the email could even be blocked. Keep in mind that even in this day and age, not everyone has high-speed internet connections.
- Use good structure and layout - reading from a computer screen is more difficult than reading from a piece of paper; therefore, the structure and layout of your email message is very important. Use short paragraphs and blank lines between each paragraph. When making points, number or mark each point.
- Do not overuse the high priority option - if you overuse this option, it will lose its impact when you really need it. Even if an email has a high priority, your message might come across as slightly aggressive if you flag it as "high priority".
- Do not write in CAPITALS - MANY READERS DON'T LIKE ALL CAPS. IT'S HARD TO READ AND SEEMS LIKE YOU ARE SHOUTING!
- Don't leave out the message thread - you should always include the original mail in your reply. Some people feel that this is unnecessary; but, if you receive many emails on a daily basis, obviously you cannot remember the details of each and every one of them. Including the original email in your reply will give not only you but the recipient a history of your email conversation.
- Add disclaimers to your emails.
- Read the email before you send it - I don't know how many times I thought I had everything "just right" then found something that was way out of line when I re-read the document. Re-reading your email will help you send a more effective message and avoid misunderstandings.
- Do not overuse the "Reply to All" - use this feature only if your message needs to be seen by each person who received the original email; using "Reply to All" is effective and appropriate for use in "group communications".
- Mass Mailings - use the bcc: field or do a mail merge - when sending an email "mailing" (such as a newsletter), some people tend to place all the email addresses in the "To:" or "CC:" field. There are two drawbacks to this practice: (1) the recipient knows that you have sent the same message to a large number of recipients, and (2) you are publicizing someone else's email address without their permission.
- Take care with abbreviations and emoticons - In business emails, try to avoid abbreviations such as BTW (by the way) and LOL (laugh out loud). The recipient might not be aware of the meaning of the abbreviation. The same goes for emoticons, such as a smiley :-). If you aren't sure if the recipient will know what this means, avoid using it.
- Take care with formatting - the sender might not be able to view formatting, or might see different fonts than you had intended. Use colors that are easy to read on the background.
  
- Take care with rich text and HTML messages - not all email programs can handle rich text or HTML format, and if not your message will be received as a .txt attachment.
- Do not forward chain letters - we can safely assume that these are simply hoaxes.
- Do not overuse delivery and read receipts - this will almost always be annoying for your recipient. Use it only when appropriate.

- Do not ask to recall a message - there is a very good chance that your message has already been read, therefore a recall request will look very silly. It's better to simply send another email stating that you made a mistake in the previous one.
- Do not copy a message or attachment without permission - depending upon the message or attachment, you might be infringing upon copyright laws.
- Do not use email to discuss confidential information - think of sending an email like sending a postcard. If you don't want your email displayed on a bulletin board, don't send it.
- Use a meaningful subject - for instance, when you send an email to a company requesting information about a product, it is better to mention the actual name of the product (Product Name information) than to just say "product information" or the company's name in the subject.
- Use active instead of passive - for instance, "We will process your order today" sounds better than "Your order will be processed today".
- Avoid using URGENT and IMPORTANT - even more so than the "high priority" option, you must try to avoid these types of words in an email or subject line. Use them only if it is a really, really urgent or important message. And if the message really is that urgent, a phone call is best.
- Avoid long sentences - try to keep sentences to a maximum of 15-20 words. Email is meant to be a quick and effective form of communication.
- Don't send or forward emails that contain libelous, defamatory, offensive, racists or obscene remarks
- Keep your language gender neutral
- Don't reply to spam - by replying or unsubscribing to spam you are really confirming that your email address is "live", and this will only generate more spam.
- Avoid embedding sounds or using "stationary" in your messages - yes, it's "cute" but they take longer to download and can be annoying to the recipient. Additionally, when your recipient responds to your email, they may have to reformat their text (especially color) in order for it to be readable.

While I'm certainly not suggesting that you HAVE to follow each and every one of these "rules", it certainly is helpful to know the rules and plan our correspondence accordingly, making the best possible impression on those that we deal with.

In the coming months we'll cover more Email Etiquette topics such as: Manners & Tone, Being Concise & Being Professional, Spelling, Grammar, & Attachments, and lastly Questions to Ask Yourself before you hit send.

Until next month.....

*Nancy*