

Write E-Mail that Gets Results

As seen in the May 2000 Issue of Business Leader Magazine

By Judy Griffin

As a businessperson, you well know the value of e-mail – it’s quick, immediate, simplifies record keeping, reaches a wide audience with minimal effort, and makes sending attachments a breeze. You also know that poorly written e-mail can have undesirable outcomes, chief among them the loss of your credibility, not to mention the potential liability for your company.

E-mail can be a powerful communication tool, one that’s unarguably here to stay. After all, statistics show that for every piece of correspondence sent via “snail mail,” there are ten pieces of correspondence zipping through cyberspace. So how can you make the most of this lightning-fast mode of communication? The following suggestions will help you learn how to write effective e-mail, the kind that increases your chances of getting your message noticed, read, and acted upon.

Determine if e-mail is the best way to communicate your message. We all complain about the number of e-mails we get, so the best way to gain electronic credibility is to send an e-mail only when appropriate and necessary.

Some news is simply better left to other modes of communication. For example, deliver bad or unwelcome news face-to-face, or if that’s not possible, at least on the telephone. It’s also best to deliver information in person when your aim is to persuade someone to see your position.

Remember, only about 7% of face-to-face communication takes place exclusively through the words we use. The way we say

something– that is, the tone and inflection we use– and our body language communicate the bulk of our message. Words on a computer screen have to be well chosen to avoid misinterpretation and to capture the nuances of our intent. Even then, the potential for misinterpretation still exists.

Send e-mail only to the appropriate people. Your message may be important, but it must also be relevant to all of your recipients. Resist the temptation to send your e-mail to people who will find it irrelevant, or your future e-mails are likely to go unread. Establish a good reputation by sending e-mail **ONLY** to those people who need to know your message.

When sending an e-mail to multiple recipients be sure to clarify who on the receiver list needs to take action. You’re more likely to get the response you desire.

Write a precise and succinct subject line. All of us have received messages whose subject lines trumpet “VERY IMPORTANT, PLEASE READ ASAP!” only to discover the message isn’t quite as earth shattering as the sender implied. If your subject line is vague or breathlessly urgent, and you have a reputation for crying wolf, your e-mail might be a short click away from cyber-trash. After all, busy people are usually eager to weed out messages they don’t think they need to read.

To increase the chances of getting your message read, write a subject line that is short, specific, and relevant to the recipient. If you were, for example, writing to tell your staff that their offices must be vacated Monday afternoon for a safety inspection of the building, which of the following

subject lines would be both accurate and likely to get your message read?

Subject 1: Building Inspection next week

Subject 2: Vacate building Monday at noon

If you chose *Subject 2*, “Vacate building Monday at noon,” you’d likely get your employees’ attention because they can see its relevance. Chances are they will open the e-mail to get the pertinent details.

Subject 1 is vague, and some recipients may opt to skip it entirely, not understanding its relevance to them.

Get right to your point and keep it brief. State your reason for writing in the first sentence. If you give too much background information, rather than launching immediately into your main point, most recipients will skip it and begin searching for the main idea buried within the text or, worse yet, not bother reading it at all. Put your main point right up front. Busy readers will appreciate you for it.

Keep paragraphs short. How many e-mails have you received that meander on...sentence after sentence, screen after screen, with nothing to break up the endless sea of words? Not particularly inviting, is it?

Lengthy paragraphs are not only visually overwhelming, but they can muddle your message as well, diminishing reader comprehension. Always write text for the convenience of the recipient to ensure easy understanding and response. For maximum readability keep your paragraphs short and set forth one idea or point per paragraph. If you wish to emphasize an especially

Write E-Mail that Gets Results

As seen in the May 2000 Issue of Business Leader Magazine

important point, set it off as a single-sentence paragraph. That way, it is less likely to be missed.

You might also consider skipping lines between paragraphs to create white space, which adds to the visual appeal and readability of your message. Even though your e-mail application may enable you to format text and insert graphics for emphasis and visual appeal, you can't always count on your recipient's e-mail application to have the same capability. Your formatting may get filtered out and show up instead as text without bullets, intended font selection, graphics, etc.

Use attachments judiciously. With the glut of computer viruses circulating, many people feel at least a little jittery about opening an attached file, especially from someone they don't know. There are, however, compelling reasons to consider an e-mail attachment. If you have lengthy information to impart, an attachment enables recipients to print and read it later and/or file in an electronic folder for future reference.

That said, first consider the value of attaching a particular document. Is the information truly worth the recipient's downloading time? If so, could you make it even easier for the recipient by cutting portions of the attachment and pasting them directly into your e-mail message?

Reminder: If you're simply sending information that needs no response from the recipient, write "FYI" as a courtesy to your reader.

Observe rules of spelling, grammar, usage, and punctuation. Writing effective e-mail means paying attention to the mechanics of language, like proper spelling, punctuation, and general rules of grammar. Because e-mail is quick and informal, many people don't pay careful attention to spelling and grammar. But most people judge business e-mail as they would any other written document. Glaring errors can even suggest that the e-mail is not to be taken seriously.

Most e-mail applications have tools that flag grammar and spelling errors. Learning to use

these tools effectively can help you write and send error-free e-mail.

Bottom line—dot your i's and cross your t's because your professional reputation is at stake.

Mind your manners.

Don't send an e-mail you've written when you're angry or upset. While it might feel good to click the send button in the moment, you'll likely regret it later. Best policy: write it, wait at least an hour, revise it from a fresh perspective, then press the send button. You may avoid both embarrassment and potentially serious repercussions.

Remember, courtesy counts, and it goes a long way in getting your e-mail read and acted upon, which is, after all, the whole point.

*© Copyright 2003 by Judy Griffin.
All rights reserved.*

Judy Griffin is a Business Writing & Communications Trainer and founder of Write Angles, a local company that offers training and coaching to improve your business communication. For information, visit www.WriteAnglesNC.com, or call (919) 596-1978.

