

The Ten Commandments of Effective E-mail

E-mail reached its potential as a time-saving means of communication for about 20 minutes, sometime in the early nineties. It's been downhill ever since, thanks to spam and – to a lesser degree – forwarded jokes, virus hoaxes, and other sloppy habits of many ordinary e-mail users. This means that a message you send has to compete with dozens of others for the recipient's attention, and most of those others were, at best, annoying. With that in mind, the goal here is to keep your message from being a part of the problem.

1. One Message, One Topic

It's tempting, when creating an e-mail message, to take the "as long as I've got your attention" approach, and cover several subjects. You might ask a quick yes/no question in the first paragraph, raise a point that requires more thought in the second, and comment on another subject entirely in the third. If the recipient answers the first question quickly, it's possible that he or she will see the "replied" icon in the message list and the additional topics will be lost. A better approach is to send a separate e-mail message – with suitable subject lines – for each topic. That way, those requiring quick action can be handled without compromising less urgent items.

2. Use Meaningful Subject Lines

The subject line should tell the recipient exactly what the message is about. Ideally, it will also indicate what response, if any, is needed. The subject line "FYI" says nothing. By contrast, the lines "Meeting: design team rescheduled for 4pm; please confirm" and "Design update: blueprints available for your review" tell the recipient what's happening, and what needs to be done about it.

3. Be Brief

Get to the point. Your messages shouldn't inspire the reader to wonder whether you're being paid by the word. (We could say more on this topic, but will instead take the title to heart.)

4. Respect Your Recipients' Privacy

If you need to send a message to several people, be aware that placing them in the "To:" or "CC:" field makes their e-mail addresses available to all of the recipients. At best, some of those recipients might view the act as a serious breach of confidence. Beyond that, anyone who responds using the "reply all" button will be sending their message to everyone on the original list. Needless to say, it can get messy. The solution is to put your own e-mail address in the "To:" field, and use the "BCC:" field for the distribution list. (BCC, by the way, stands for Blind Carbon Copy.)



5. Reply with Context, but Not Too Much

Most e-mail programs allow you to include the text of the original message when you create a reply. If the incoming message was, itself, brief, taking advantage of the feature places your reply in context. If the original message was long, or covered topics not germane to your reply, cut the excess. Ideally, your reply and the original context should fit in a single screen.

6. Don't Forward a Forward

Each time a message is forwarded, the e-mail program adds formatting that makes the text more difficult to read. If the content is important enough to send to someone else, it's worth taking a moment to cut-and-paste the text into a new message. Be aware, too, that some web-based e-mail applications treat forwarded messages as attachments. This means that the original content could be buried several clicks deep.

7. Avoid Attachments

This could be a moot point, since many companies have set their e-mail systems to reject any and all attachments. This is not a bandwidth issue as much as a reaction to the very real problem of viruses and trojans being transmitted within attachments. Think of how you react when an incoming e-mail arrives, unannounced, with an attachment. Unless you've been living on Mars for the last decade, you probably wonder whether the message is legitimate, and the attachment is dangerous. If you need to send a file to someone, the best way is to place it in a public storage area and let the recipient download it. If you must send an attachment, compress it to a .zip file to keep from triggering extension-based filters at the receiving end.

8. Spelling Counts

Your e-mail transmits more than raw content. Like it or not, its presentation tells the recipient something about who you are. This is especially true in the case of recipients who don't already know you, and it doesn't matter one bit whether the inferences he or she makes are accurate. The first step is to spell-check the message before sending it. Beyond that, be aware that a spell check program won't catch the difference between there, they're, and their; nor will it find the apostrophes that so many people wrongly insert before the "s" in simple plurals. If the message is important, or even if it's not, proofread before hitting send.

9. Tailor the Message to the Recipient

The warning about spelling (and its cousins, grammar and syntax) can safely be ignored if you're telling your sister that the puppy had kittens. Your sister formed her opinion of you long ago. Conversely, if the message is to a new contact with whom you hope to do business, treat it with even greater care. This is especially important if you tend to pepper your non-business messages with smileys or texting shorthand, such as ttfn (ta ta for now).



10. Don't Use E-mail for...

It's been said that e-mail shouldn't be used for any message you wouldn't want to see on the front page of the New York Times. That's good advice: e-mail is most emphatically not private. You should also avoid e-mail when an immediate response is needed, or when the topic would be better served by a more give-and-take medium. In both cases, a phone call might be the better choice. The same is true when you need to deliver bad news. Don't use an e-mail to fire a subordinate. After all, a year from now he might be wondering whether or not to fire you.

11. (Bonus Commandment) DON'T SHOUT

But surely you already knew that one!