

How to retain customers through proper use of email - The Merchants

Guide to Email Etiquette

By Phil Donaldson

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For the same reason you would never SHOUT down the phone at a customer, you should never type an email in UPPER CASE. But what else do you do that might be turning good customers away?

As a web designer, I see a lot of emails. And some of the most badly written emails I've seen are from merchants. Many of them are far too busy to give the niceties of email a first thought. But at what cost?

I'll show you the things that reduce your chances of making a sale, and some simple rules to follow to help you engage your customers.

If you want a quick reference list without the explanations, there's one here that you can print out and stick on your wall:

<http://www.GuerrillaRetail.co.nz/emailettiquetteref.html>

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Be Courteous

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* Write like you would in a printed letter

Do you put the same thought into writing an email that you put into a written letter? Do you use the same language, or do you take shortcuts?

The abbreviated and often blunt responses found in email lack context, body language and facial expressions. A well intentioned message can easily be read as rude or even offensive.

If it's important enough to write, it's important enough to

write properly.

* Say please and thank you

Many people overlook their P's and Q's because email is often written in haste. But without them, a polite request can turn into a blunt demand.

* Never reply when angry

The worst email is one sent in anger and in a hurry; it's a sure way to send a customer packing. At the least, read your email slowly 3 times before clicking the send button. At best, wait an hour or even a day before you reply.

Before replying to an email that has angered you, read it again slowly. You'd be surprised at the number of angry or sarcastic replies sent to emails that have been read too quickly and misinterpreted.

* NEVER SHOUT

Typing everything in UPPER CASE is the written equivalent of shouting, and is considered one of the rudest things you can do.

It also makes an email harder to read, and hence difficult to understand.

* Personalise

If you know the recipients name, always use it. Whether a friendly "Hi Phil," or a formal "Dear Mr Donaldson".

Address the recipient by name, or you look like you're not interested in knowing it.

* Avoid profanity

What you think is funny is likely to be offensive to someone else. Unless you know the recipient (and their sense of humour) well, avoid anything that could be even remotely offensive.

Be careful with slang too. A word commonly used as a mild exclamation in one country, may imply devious behaviour with animals in another.

Be Clear

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* Use a relevant subject line

A meaningful subject line tells the reader what the email is about before they open it. It also makes it easy to find the email again if required later.

Would you have found a subject line of "email" useful in this newsletter?

* Check spelling and grammar

Don't check your spelling and grammar to be finicky, do it to get your message across clearly. Not only does poor

spelling and grammar make you appear unprofessional, it can cause significant confusion.

Netscape and Outlook both have spell checkers now, so turn them on if you have them.

* Be concise

Sentences are easier to comprehend when they contain fewer words.

More words increase the risk that your recipient will have to read a sentence twice.

* Answer all questions

Many email enquiries contain more than one question. Ensure you don't just answer the first or last question you see.

You'll frustrate your prospects by not answering them all.

You damage the quality of your service, and you increase your own workload when you have to re-answer questions.

* Beware of abbreviations

For any given abbreviation, you can be sure there's someone who won't understand it. So use them carefully.

This applies to Emoticons (emotion icons) too - these are the little faces like :-) which attempt to add expression to email. Emoticons have hundreds of variations and are likely to confuse new internet users.

Reply with Context

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* Use the reply button

When you use the reply button the same subject line is copied to your email, so the recipient can identify the email as a reply.

This is even more important if the email is part of a discussion (also known as a thread).

* Quote the Previous Email

Your email program will have a setting that copies the text from the previous email when replying. Always enable it.

There's nothing more tedious than searching through old emails to figure out what someone is replying to.

* Reply above quoted text

Type your response above any existing discussion.

It's slow and annoying for the recipient if they have to scroll through a long discussion to find your comments at the bottom. You can tell most email programs to start your reply above the quoted text.

If there are people not able to read a discussion in reverse order, they are surely a minority.

* Reply fast to impress

When a prospect sends an email enquiry to an address found on your web site, they've most likely sent the same enquiry to a competitor. The first response will often get the sale. Many people have low expectations for receiving responses to this type of enquiry. Large companies often take 3 days or more to respond. Make an effort to respond the same day and you're likely to be remembered for it.

Sell Yourself

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* Refer to your web site

Are your products listed on your web site with photos? What other useful resources do you have on your web site?

Tell prospects about those resources as often as you can (be specific). The more often you do it, the more visitors will go there and keep going back.

To add a web site address to your email open the page in your browser, then copy the URL (http...) from the address line and paste it into the email.

* Use a signature

A signature is the text at the bottom of an email that identifies you. It usually includes your name, job title, company, phone number, email address and web site address. Ensure you also briefly tell people what you do.

Below my signature I have:

Free newsletter - Guerrilla Retail Tips

Increase sales using your brain not your wallet

[">http://www.GuerrillaRetail.co.nz](http://www.GuerrillaRetail.co.nz)

An Ounce of Prevention

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* Read it twice

Once you've sent an email there's no way to get it back (short of generating a global electro-magnetic pulse).

So make sure you read the whole email before you send it.

You'll often pick up things you miss while you are writing it.

* Keep it safe

Security is a big issue on the Internet, and email is the least secure form of communication. It's easy for hackers to spy on your email, so never email anything the bad guys must not see.

Never ask a customer to email you a credit card number. Use a secure server, phone, fax or mail order instead.

* Fancy stationery causes fancy problems

The pretty colours and nice background image in your

stationery may look good in M\$ Outlook, but how do they look in Netscape, Eudora or Opera?

This type of stationery has crashed my email program (Netscape), and I'm not alone.

So unless you really know what you're doing, don't add colours or graphics to your email. You can't guarantee the recipient will be able to read it.

* Scan for viruses

The last thing you want is for your customers to put you on their blacklist because you sent them a virus.

If you don't already have one, download the free anti-virus program from www.grisoft.com . It's free, easy to use, and very reliable.

As you can see, there are a lot of things that affect your chances of making a sale.

Which ones do you need to improve on?

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