

Being Heard in the Age of Email

By William Arruda

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E-mail has been around for a while. And even though we have augmented e-mail communications with newer technologies, like team rooms, and chat and video teleconferencing, e-mail remains, for most businesses, the primary communications mechanism. It has become such a powerful and pervasive component of our communications toolbox that people who sit so close to us that we can hear them type use it to communicate with us.

And the average knowledge worker receives LOTS of e-mails each day. In fact, most of us receive so many that we feel overwhelmed and almost paralyzed when we look at the screen showing how many new mails we have received. Yet despite e-mail's ubiquity and popularity, users, in general, are not proficient at its use. So here are ten tips to help you make the most out of this critical business tool... without letting it consume you.

1. Get the right fit.

Firstly, you need to determine if e-mail is the right vehicle for your communication. It is - if and only if - if meets at least one of these criteria:

The content of the communication needs to be documented.

The recipient is unavailable (by phone, instant messaging or in person), not co-located or in a different time zone

It is not time-sensitive.

There are multiple recipients who are not co-located or available simultaneously. (Read the caution below in Number 3 about broadcasting e-mails).

The subject does not require a lot of back and forth discussion.

Even if you decide that e-mail is the right medium, don't create a mail or respond too quickly or emotionally to e-mails you receive. "Sometimes the phone is better for difficult interactions. You need the personal contact to resolve matters and certainly don't want to document things in ways you may later wish you hadn't said." cautions Janet Jordan, communications expert at Keynote Communications in Boston.

2. What's my objective, anyway?

If you've got a lot of information to share; consider writing an executive summary and attach a longer document to the mail or post it somewhere and include a link. Don't expect people to read through a 10 page e-mail to find the pertinent content. The time that people can devote to e-mail is precious, so tell them what they really need to know up front and provide access to further detail should they have need or interest.

8. Be clear.

We need to be extra clear in composing e-mails. Communication is made up of a lot more than just words. When we communicate in person, we use words, facial gestures, body language, and tone together to deliver a complete communication. With the invention of the telephone, we lost the physical component of communication and with e-mail we have added another layer of abstraction - and we are left with just the words. Don't get me wrong, words are very powerful things! In fact, your choice of the words themselves and how you arrange them in prose becomes all the more important when they're not accompanied by those other elements that we experience in face-to-face communication. This makes it critical that we choose our words carefully to ensure that there is only one meaning that can be discerned from each sentence.

If you're authoring an e-mail that is particularly important you may want to consider writing it in word processing software such as Microsoft Word. The added benefit of built in dictionary, thesaurus and grammar checker can give you the piece of mind that your form is top notch so you can focus on the e-mail's content.

And when composing a multiple paragraph e-mail consider including headlines above each paragraph to provide greater clarity and guide the reader through your thought process. For example, the headlines for a mail dealing with a departmental challenge might be: 'Background, The Issue, Potential Solutions, My Recommendation, What I Need From You.'

9. Use power tools.

Another way to ensure that your communication is clear and accurate is the appropriate use of text styles and fonts. But be careful not to create an e-mail that combines too many font types and colors; there's a fine line between using formatting options to aid your reader in negotiating content and creating a document that's more suitable for the wall of your daughter's kindergarten classroom. And remember that if you're sending your mail outside the company, the recipient may not be able to see your creative use of text options. Simple uppercase and punctuation may be your best tools in this case.

10. Make your expectation clear.

Tell the recipient(s) what you want them to do next and when it needs to be done. And give them the info they need to do to do it. Phone numbers, fax, e-mail addresses, snail mail addresses should all be part of your e-mail template. And make your e-mail template reflect your personal Brand. In addition to your writing style, you can use a consistent on-brand template to further communicate your personal brand attributes.

About William Arruda

For nearly 20 years, William Arruda has been working with some of the world's most valuable

Brands, including KPMG, Lotus, IBM, and Primark Corporation. Combining his brand experience with his passion for people, William founded Reach (www.reachcc.com), the world's first brand management company for organizations and individuals.

A member of the International Coach Federation (ICF), William holds a Master's Degree in Education, and has lent his expertise to audiences around the world. He has published articles in publications ranging from the Wall Street Journal to brandchannel.com and is the author of two upcoming books: *You: Brand New - Three Steps to Successful Personal Branding*; and *Health Without the Health Club*. You can reach him at williamarruda@reachcc.com.

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