

Are You Ticking People Off With Your E-mails?

By Alexandria K. Brown

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4 Mistakes to Avoid When Sending Messages

Even now that e-mail has been around for several years, some of us still aren't "getting the message" when it comes to being both effective and polite. While e-mail is a quick, easy, and informal way to exchange information, it still needs some TLC in order to do its job, which is to *communicate*!

One statistic says the average American worker receives approximately 50 e-mails a day -- that's a lot of information to read through. And this number sounds low to me -- I get around 100 a day! Numbers like these mean that your little message is literally competing for your recipient's attention. You'd better make sure your e-mail tells her what you want her to know -- fast!

While I have a mile-long list of e-mail atrocities that I could share, here are the four most common mistakes I see in my inbox every day. By paying attention to these simple points, you can easily ensure your messages come across clearly and professionally ... and that they actually get READ!

Mistake #1: "Dissing" the Subject

Ever receive an e-mail with an empty subject line? That drives me nuts! It's simply a courtesy to tell your reader what info you're delivering. When receiving a list of new e-mails, we all use the subject lines to quickly determine what each one is about and whether we need to open it right away.

The more info you give in the subject line, the better. For example, instead of just titling your e-mail "Meeting," give me the details: "Marketing Meeting Set for Nov. 9." This way I know instantly that you're talking about the Marketing Department, *and* that I have a meeting to go to on Nov. 9.

Also keep in mind that many e-mail systems cut-off long subject lines, so shoot for *six words or less.*

Mistake #2: Rambling On and On and On and...

Because we're all receiving way too much information every day, it's important to make your point FAST and CLEARLY. Have you ever gotten an e-mail that's so long you put off reading it, and later discovered it had some important information at the end? An associate of mine used to do this --

she'd send a drawn-out missive about her enlightening trip to Bali, and at the very end of her message she'd sneak in something urgent like, "Oh and the client will be here today at 2 p.m. instead of 4." Yikes!

Fire your "biggest gun" first. If you have something important to tell me, or if you want me to take any sort of action, be sure to make your point in the first few sentences. Otherwise I may not read it.

Try to keep your entire e-mail shorter than *two computer screens* -- one screen is best. For long, detailed messages, provide a brief list or summary at the top, and break up the copy below with subheads.

Or, better yet, split up your points into a few different e-mails. For example, if you need to tell me something important about my taxes, ask if I'm available for a conference call tomorrow, and fill me in about your hot date from last weekend, make each subject a separate e-mail. Not only will you ensure that I'll read each point, but if I need to get back to you on something, I can just save that particular message.

Mistake #3: Funky Formatting

Your e-mail program may let you underline, italicize, boldface, and color your words, but when your recipients read your messages, these features may not carry through. Text formatting rarely translates between e-mail systems, and your reader may instead get a garbled mess of abstract characters (like this: "## @ @!!&&&") that muddle your message.

A safe way to emphasize a word is to place an *asterisk* before and after the word, as I do here often in my e-zine text. Typing words in all-caps is another option. But while caps make an impact when used occasionally, they're extremely hard to read.

THE TOPS AND BOTTOMS OF CAPITAL LETTERS ARE COMPLETELY ALIGNED, MAKING IT HARDER TO QUICKLY DIFFERENTIATE WORDS. NEVER TYPE YOUR WHOLE MESSAGE IN ALL CAPS UNLESS YOU WANT TO IRRITATE SOMEONE, BECAUSE IT COMES ACROSS AS "SCREAMING."

ARE YOUR EYES HURTING YET?

OK, SORRY!

Typing in all caps also labels you as an Internet newbie -- many computer first-timers are inexplicably attracted to that caps lock key. (Someone should start an intervention group for that.)

Mistake #4: Operating Undercover

Ever get an e-mail from someone and you just can't figure out who it is? I've had to explain many times to associates that e-mail addresses like "fuzzybear4u@wackomail.net" don't quite let your recipients know whom is calling. Many people may even delete your e-mail, mistaking your message for spam. (And goofy screen names don't do much good for your professional image either.)

Even if your identity is obvious based on your e-mail address, it's still a courtesy to sign your e-mail. And even better, include your *signature file.* You know what a signature (or "sig") file is, right? It's that little blurb with contact info that you can automatically insert at the end of every e-mail you send.

Most e-mail programs now allow you to use sig files -- even AOL 6.0. At the least, just list your

name, title, company, phone, e-mail address, and Web site URL. And don't think that including a sig file in every e-mail is overkill -- I find it wonderfully handy to grab a client's phone number off of her last e-mail to me.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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