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Effective Email—Eight Mistakes To Avoid

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Think back 10 years ago...email was in its infancy, just beginning to gain widespread acceptance in the business world. Today, email is everywhere; it is hard to imagine business without it. But is it enhancing our productivity, or slowing us down with an entirely new set of problems?

Most people know that you shouldn't write emails in ALL CAPS (this is perceived as SHOUTING), but email etiquette is still evolving. The following are some common, but less obvious, mistakes that can be easily avoided.

Mistake No. 1: Send Very Personal Messages

Any email you write may be around for years on your company's backup tapes, and many companies monitor all employee communications. Here's a litmus test: How would you feel if your employees' emails were to be exhibited in court or printed in the newspaper? Are you confident that it would create an appropriate image of your company? With nearly a quarter of all small-business owners involved in lawsuits at some point, this is a serious concern. At the very least, every company should have an email policy limiting personal use of business resources such as the Internet and email.

Mistake No. 2: Forward Viruses And Hoaxes

At least once a month, a client forwards me an email asking, "Is this for real?" The email usually contains a long list of technical instructions you must follow, or a very frightening warning. Not a single one of these has been legitimate, and I applaud my clients for their skepticism. However, these days, viruses and hoaxes are getting ever-

more sophisticated, and it is harder and harder to spot scams. Never download attachments from an unfamiliar source, and if you have any doubts, ask an expert or check for information at a site like <http://www.symantec.com>, which maintains up-to-the-minute news on viruses and similar scams. Never forward one of these messages unless—and this is a long shot—you find out it really is legitimate.

Mistake No. 3: Don't Bother With Grammar Or Spelling

Would you read this article if it were poorly written? No. So why do we have to tolerate poorly written emails? Email is a quick, easy form of communication, but your recipient merits the few extra seconds it takes to run a spell-check and make sure your message is clear. Sloppy emails always make me wonder whether the sender is sloppy with the rest of his or her work. This is not an impression that will help your business be successful.

Mistake No. 4: Flood Your Friends And Co-Workers

We already struggle with information overload...don't add to the problem. Keep your emails short and to the point, so they can be read quickly, and send useful, business-related information. Use emails to confirm phone conversations when it makes sense to clarify follow-up actions and agreements, but use caution in sending emails solely as a CYA. I've been guilty of this myself, but my experience has been that many of these emails are unnecessary, and many can be dealt with more effectively in person.

Mistake No. 5: Never Leave Your Desk

With our busy schedules, it's faster to send an email than to walk across the office

or pick up the phone. But if email is all you ever use, you isolate yourself. In a world where relationships can make or break your success, isolation can seriously impair your effectiveness.

Mistake No. 6: Isolate Yourself Even More

Some people who make mistake #5 go even further and make it difficult for others to reach out to them in any way other than email. So make it easier: first, create an email signature file that includes your phone number. This will be included in all your emails, making it easy for your recipients to pick up the phone if needed—it's simply a much more efficient way to handle some types of discussions. If you have a website, be sure to include your phone number there as well, because many people visiting your site will prefer phone to email, and you don't want to miss out on any leads. And lastly, if someone leaves a phone message, reply by phone rather than email, because it's likely that your caller prefers that form of communication for the issue they wish to discuss.

Mistake No. 7: Send An Email When You Are Angry

Because email is impersonal, it may seem like an ideal way to deal with a difficult situation...to resolve a dispute or provide "constructive" criticism, for example. This is far from the case. Email inspires many of the same feelings as road rage. Without the contextual cues we are familiar with, such as the tone of voice and body language, it is very easy to misinterpret even the most harmless messages. And it is amazing how fast an email discussion can deteriorate into an email war. Worse yet, email disputes are resolved far less frequently than disputes that are handled in person or over the phone.

Mistake No. 8: Type Email During Phone Conversations

One last mistake...when you are on the phone, focus on your caller, not your computer. We really can hear you when you are typing!

A Few Final Words

The bottom line? Focus on the following three areas and you will become an email etiquette expert:

- Create a company Internet/email policy that limits personal use of these tools.
- Keep email communications clear and succinct.
- Don't forget the value and impact of personal contact.

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