

The do's and don'ts of business e-mail - Part 1

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E-mail has become such a large part of our lives so quickly that many of us haven't really had time to actually consider the impact it's made on us and the way we communicate with each other.

The main thing we're aware of is that our inboxes are getting fuller each day. This means more to read and more e-mails to answer.

We used to be able to describe our work frustrations with little pictures of people buried under mountains of paperwork piled up on their desks. Now we need to draw people drowning in their PC's!

Pretending that e-mail is going to get less or go away won't help. It's definitely here to stay. To use it to communicate effectively with as many people as possible, e-mail, especially business e-mail, needs to follow certain guidelines.

As a business owner I get to deal with stacks of e-mail on a regular basis. The following points came about after my raising more than one eyebrow at some of the business-related letters I've received. So, ladies and gentleman (and anyone else so inclined), please adjust your seats and thinking as we venture into the more serious depths of E-mail Etiquette in Business.

An e-mail consists of two very basic parts: what it says and what it looks like. The power-core of e-mail is the wording. Formatting and "design" may help it look better but if the actual wording is confusing or gives offence then the e-mail is not going to be a success. Minding your manners

- Greetings: Although e-mail messages are generally more informal than other business communications, it still pays to be polite. A greeting of some kind (Dear Chris / Hi Mike) is appropriate, especially if it is the first message you are sending to that specific person that day. (Only if multiple messages are sent during the course of the day may it become appropriate to write very short and to the point messages.)

- Your greeting sets the tone for the rest of your message and helps the reader focus on the communication between the two of you. No greeting is a bit like shouting your message across the street to someone whom you haven't seen for a while - he may find it a rude and annoying experience and be disinclined to consider what you have to say.

- Ending your e-mail politely also helps create the image of the polite, professional business person. An abrupt "Jake" at the bottom of the message is probably better than nothing but a friendly or respectful closing would be better. Try "Regards" or "Yours sincerely" or something that you feel comfortable with and that is appropriate to the situation.

- Also make sure that you include all relevant contact details at the end of your message. It gives you credibility as a business person when clients have a number of ways of contacting you. It also makes life easier for the client - which gives her even more reason to be impressed with you.

- "Please" and "thank you" are two little words that can make a big difference to the way people respond to your messages. Nobody likes to feel ordered about or unappreciated. A little dose of simple good manners is never out of place.

- A quick word about slang: don't. You might understand the slang you use but your reader may be from a different culture, region, country or social group and she might find it confusing or even offensive. Even if your reader does understand it, slang is not appropriate in professional communications. Offensive language of any kind should not be used in e-mail.

See E-mail Etiquette 2 for more e-mail etiquette pointers that are essential for good business communications. In the meantime, watch your language (or you may just get pepper in your inbox!) :)

To find out how to send lots of e-mails at once - without spamming - take a look at Newsletters vs Auto responders: what's the difference .