

The do's and don'ts of business e-mail - Part 2

Last Updated Thursday, 17 July 2008

The do's and don'ts of business e-mail - Part 2

A few more pointers to consider to make your business e-mail as polished and professional as possible. (Part 1 is here .)
Your English teacher was right

- Grammar & spelling may bring back bad memories from high school but they are still important. Bad grammar and spelling can quickly create the impression that the writer is sloppy, careless, lazy, doesn't pay attention to detail (or doesn't care about it) or a host of other negative ideas. Definitely not the image you want to portray when you're doing business.
- Most word processors and even e-mail programmes have spelling and grammar checkers. While not infallible (you still need to check your writing carefully yourself) they can help you avoid glaring and embarrassing errors.
- When writing business e-mail it is acceptable to use contractions (don't for do not / can't for cannot etc) but remember, slang must be avoided. It's not just what you say but how you say it...
- You may well be tempted to think tone and style have more to do with gyms, shopping and lifestyle than with e-mails but I'd like you to consider them in the context of language for just a minute. An e-mail is generally dashed off quickly, without serious planning or thought about how it might actually come across. It is often difficult to gauge a person's mood or intention from her writing and ill-considered use of tone and style can very easily lead to misunderstandings and unpleasantness.
- A message that you meant to be humorous might not be interpreted as such by the reader and she might take it to mean something else completely. When composing an e-mail it might help to keep in mind that your reader may be from a culture, country, area, religion, background, social group etc that you are unaware of and this may affect the way she interprets your message.

(Of course she could also have had a fight with her husband and/or teenage son that morning, got a speeding ticket on the way to work, found her parking space occupied by the new blonde secretary and just be in a thoroughly filthy mood in general when she gets your mail. It would then definitely be better for you if there's nothing in the mail to challenge her day any further. ;)) Smile - you may end up on candid camera!

Emoticons (use of punctuation marks to create little faces that convey emotion) are widely used in e-mails and can be very useful in ensuring you get the correct message across. (They are however, part of the more relaxed culture of e-mail and sms messaging and I wouldn't recommend using them in formal business letters and proposals. ;))

Here is a short list of the more commonly used emoticons:

- :) = smile
- :(= frown
- ;) = wink
- (For more emoticons, take a look here .) Be polite and considerate
- Absence of proper punctuation also makes a message difficult to read (it's got to do with the way the eye is trained to see shapes, letters and words.) It also creates the idea that the writer doesn't care enough about what she's saying to organize her thoughts. Do you want to be the recipient of someone else's disorganized, careless ramblings? Probably not, so don't make your readers have to wade through yours.
- A final tip: DON'T SHOUT! It may be faster to type everything in either upper or lower case but most people know this isn't really the way language is supposed to be written. Typing everything IN UPPER CASE is also regarded to be shouting when it's done in e-mails, online forums and discussion groups. It's generally considered rude and bound to annoy the person reading it. Business e-mail contributes to the image projected by your company. Take a few extra moments to make it as professional as possible and it will do much to enhance the recipient's perception of you and your business.

(How to write copy for your website that works will give you some guidelines for website copywriting.)