Email Is in the Eye of the Beholder

By Janet Lewis and Norman M. Goldfarb

When you send an email, you are trying to communicate something to the recipient(s). Once *your* email leaves your outbox and arrives in the recipient's inbox, it becomes *their* email. It no longer matters what you *meant to write*, only what the recipient *actually reads*. You thus need to look at your email messages from the recipient's perspective. If that person finds your message confusing, annoying, frustrating, embarrassing or just a waste of their time, your effort at communication failed, at least to some extent. And that can have real consequences. Therefore, before hitting the SEND button, try to look at your email with the eyes of the recipient.

Email Messages You Do Not Want to Receive

Imagine you have just returned to the office to find your email inbox overflowing with new messages. Working through the backlog is hard enough, but some of the senders have made it even harder for you with emails like the following:

The Header

- The email includes a long list of Recipients and CCs, which means you are effectively sharing email addresses that recipients may not want shared with everyone.
- The email is yet another URGENT, HIGH PRIORITY message.
- The email should not have copied you, and everyone else keeps hitting REPLY ALL, so you keep getting more messages you don't want to see.
- The email was forwarded to you without comment...and you don't know why or even who forwarded it to you.
- The email is the umpteenth message in a chain that could be resolved quickly on the phone (but there is no telephone number to call).

The Body

- The subject line and the body of the email don't seem to be related.
- The email starts with a salutation that is too familiar, too formal, or absent.
- Typos in the email make it harder for you to understand or to take the message seriously.
- The email is ambiguous or impossible to interpret. It says, for example, "Let's do it!" in response to a message you sent offering three options.
- The email seems harsh or abrupt (but was just sent in a hurry by someone else working through *their* email backlog) or appears to have been sent in anger. You're not sure how to react…or you reply in anger and escalate the problem.
- The email discloses information you should not have received. Should you ignore it? Should you reply to the sender? Should you forward it to the person you think it was meant for?
- The email is following up on a previous message, but the content of the previous email is not included and you can't find it.
- The email includes an endless series of previous messages that must be read to figure out what's going on.

- The email seems to be asking you do something (e.g., "call me") that should have been directed to someone who was copied on the previous message.
- The email includes more than one — or any — emoticons, words in all caps, or exclamation marks, which should be saved for personal emails.
- The email forces you to set up an account in a secure transmission system that you will never use again, and then says something that is not confidential.
- There is no signature explaining who the person is, and maybe no sender name at all, just a cryptic FROM address, so you don't know who sent it, and might have to do some detective work to figure that out.

Email Messages You Wish You Had Received

Here are some messages you wish you *had* seen, but did not:
- The email was sent, by error, to an obsolete email address.
- The sender hit the REPLY button instead of the REPLY ALL button, so you did not get the copy you need.
- The sender received your previous message and will not be able to respond fully for some time, but has not sent you a quick message saying something like: "Message received – I'll get back to you."
- The message did not come through because it included a large file that you urgently need to see.
- The recipient never sent the reply to your urgent email because your message is buried in a huge stack of other emails that consume too much time to process because of the issues listed above.

Conclusion

Every email message should include the following:
- A concise subject line that clearly states the topic of the message
- A salutation that sets the right tone for the message
- Body text that clearly, concisely and professionally states the information you want to convey and any request for action
- A signature block that states your name, role, organization and contact information
- A thoughtfully curated list of CCs and BCCs, if any
- Attached files, if any, that are not too large to transmit
- Nothing that could be problematic in the hands of a government agency, plaintiff's attorney, competitor or possible employer

Email messages fall between text messages and phone conversations in terms of personal engagement and sophistication of communication. If you have a simple, straightforward message and a texting relationship with someone, by all means send a text. At the other extreme, if it is a difficult situation and you think your email could be misconstrued, pick up the phone.

Email is a wonderfully efficient and self-documenting means of communication, but only if you make the extra effort to use it properly. On the other hand, with improper use, you can quickly communicate your lack of professionalism or respect for the recipient. And, as a last caution, try not to send messages that will get circulated for amusement because of your colorful language or unfortunate turn of phrase.

Additional Resources

"15 email-etiquette rules every professional should know," Jacquelyn Smith, Business Insider, February 1, 2016, http://www.businessinsider.com/email-etiquette-rules-every-professional-needs-to-know-2016-1/#1-include-a-clear-direct-subject-line-1

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"What Is An Appropriate Response Time To Email?" Fast Company, 3/29/16, https://www.fastcompany.com/3058066/what-is-an-appropriate-response-time-to-email

"The Essentials of Business Etiquette: How to Greet, Eat and Tweet Your Way to Success," Barbara Pachter, McGraw-Hill Education, 2013

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