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Effective Email

1 Use proper spelling, grammar & punctuation

This is important not only because improper spelling, grammar and punctuation give a bad impression of your company, it is also important for conveying the message properly. Emails with no periods or commas are difficult to read and can sometimes even change the meaning of the text. And, if your program has a spell checking option, why not use it?

2 Don't write in CAPITALS

On the internet, IF YOU WRITE IN CAPITALS IT SEEMS AS IF YOU ARE SHOUTING. This can be highly annoying and might trigger an unwanted response in your reader.

3 Be concise and to the point

Remember that reading from a screen is harder than reading print. Noticing that an email is long might keep someone from reading it at all. Put yourself in the place of the recipient before you hit "send."

Use short paragraphs – each paragraph contains a complete thought or idea, or explores a different aspect of a topic. When making points, use numbers or bullets (Option-shift-8) or use carriage returns to separate each point.

4 Leave enough space

Use blank lines (double hard carriage returns) to separate your paragraphs. But DON'T use a carriage return within the paragraph (at the end of each line), this will make your email lines break funny on someone else's computer screen.

Steer clear of tabs, because different email programs can show tab stops differently onscreen. Use spaces if you need to indent something, but indenting the first line of each paragraph is unnecessary.

5 In general, don't leave out the message thread

When you reply to an email, you should include the original message in your reply—click "Reply" instead of "New Mail." Some people say that you must remove the previous message since this has already been sent and is therefore unnecessary. However, I could not agree less. If you receive many emails you obviously cannot remember each individual email. This means that a "threadless email" will not provide enough information and your recipient will have to spend a frustratingly long time to figure out the context of the email in order to deal with it.

If you are replying to an email but changing the topic, get rid of the thread and re-write the subject line.

6 Read the email before you send it

A lot of people don't bother to read their own email before they send it out, as can be seen from the many spelling and grammar mistakes contained in emails. Apart from this, reading your email through the eyes of the recipient will help you send a more effective message and avoid misunderstandings and inappropriate comments.

7 Use signatures

By setting preferences in your email software, you can create one or more signatures to add to each email that you send out. This should contain your full name, along with your web address, phone number and other information. Don't use over-long signatures with everything but the kitchen sink unless your employer requires it. Make several for different occasions – one with your mailing address, one without, for example. This way the person doesn't have to go look anything up if they want to phone you or take a look at your website in response to your email.

8 Don't attach unnecessary files

By sending large attachments you can annoy customers and even bring down their email system. Wherever possible try to compress attachments and only send attachments when they are productive. Moreover, you need to have a good virus scanner in place since your customers will not be very happy if you send them viruses!

Avoid using decorative backgrounds or images in your business email. They are attached to the file, even if you don't see them that way, and don't really add to the effectiveness and can annoy people.

If you really want to send beautiful formatted email, I can help you design a newsletter format and send HTML email. But be sure that the effort will enhance your message, not detract from it!

9 Don't attach a v-Card

It might seem like a convenience to your recipient to attach your v-Card with all your contact information. However, very few people know how to use them, and it's just another attachment for most people. Use a signature instead.

10 Use a meaningful subject

Remember that the people who are receiving your email are probably getting dozens if not hundreds of email every day. Try to make your subject line like a headline for an article – give them an idea of what's in it and give them a reason to care.

Don't start a new message subject with "Re:" – yes, it does mean "Regarding" but in email it signifies a reply to a previous message. Your recipient may wonder where the first email in the thread has gone.

11 Don't reply to spam

By replying to spam or by unsubscribing, you are confirming that your email address is "live". Confirming this will only generate even more spam. Therefore, just hit the delete button or use email software to remove spam automatically.

12 Watch out for phishing

Emails that appear to be from your bank or a credit card company are almost never legitimate. Most email programs have a "view source" feature – find the link that you are asked to click on and see where it is really going.

If you suspect that it is a legitimate message from your institution, go to their website directly. Don't use the link, just sign into your account and see if there is something you need to do.

13 Use templates for frequently used responses

Some questions you get over and over again, such as directions to your office or how to subscribe to your newsletter. Save these responses as drafts and paste these into your message when you need them. You can save frequently-used responses as a signature.

Be careful though, make sure you know that the answer you're supplying really relates to the question, and feel free to add a personal comment to the "canned" response.

14 Answer swiftly

Customers send an email because they wish to receive a quick response. Therefore, each email should be replied to within at least 24 hours, and preferably within the same working day. If the email is complicated, just email back saying that you have received their inquiry and that you will get back to them. This will put the customer's mind at rest and usually customers will then be very patient!

15 Dont overuse Reply to All

Only use Reply to All if you really need your message to be seen by each person who received the original message.

16 Mailings: use the Bcc: field or create a list

When sending an email mailing, some people place all the email addresses in the To: field. There are two drawbacks to this practice: (1) the recipient knows that you have sent the same message to a large number of recipients, and (2) you are publicizing someone else's email address without their permission.

One way to get round this is to place all addresses in the Bcc: field. However, the recipient will only see the address from the To: field in their email, so if this was empty, the To: field will be blank and this might look like spamming. You can send the message with your own address in the To: field to get around this.

Creating a "list" that contains all the addresses for a particular mailing is the best way to handle this. Your email or address book software should have a way to do this. Just be sure that you have a valid "Reply-To" address in your email.

17 Take care with abbreviations and emoticons

In business emails, try not to use abbreviations such as BTW (by the way) and LOL (laugh out loud). The recipient might not be aware of the meanings of the abbreviations and in business emails these are generally not appropriate. The same goes for emoticons, such as the smiley :-). If you are not sure whether your recipient knows what it means, it is better not to use it.

18 Remember that your tone can't be heard in email

Have you ever attempted sarcasm in an email, and the recipient took it the wrong way? Email communication can't convey the nuances of verbal communication. In an attempt to infer tone of voice, some people use emoticons, but use them sparingly so that you don't appear unprofessional. Also, don't assume that using a smiley will defuse a difficult message.

19 Be careful with fancy formatting

Be aware that when you send an email in rich text or HTML format, the recipient might have their preferences set to receive only plain text emails. If so, the recipient may receive your message as a .txt attachment, or at best only see the text of the email. Most email software is able to receive HTML and rich text messages but only use it if you really need to. Remember also that your recipient might see different fonts than you had intended. Stick to the standard fonts.

When in doubt, use plain text email. Always use plain text for normal course-of-business email. Even mailing list messages should be mainly plain-text unless it is really necessary to use an image.

20 How to send a clickable link

Simply add the <http://> to a website address to make a link that's clickable in your email.

21 Don't request delivery and read receipts

This will almost always annoy your recipient before he or she has even read your message. If you want to know whether an email was received it is better to ask the recipient to let you know if it was received.

22 Use active instead of passive

Try to use the active voice of a verb wherever possible. For instance, “We will process your order today,” sounds better than “Your order will be processed today.” The first sounds more personal, whereas the latter, especially when used frequently, sounds unnecessarily formal.

23 Avoid using URGENT and IMPORTANT

Even more so than the high-priority option, you must at all times try to avoid these types of words in an email or subject line. Only use this if it is a really, really urgent or important message. And if it really is urgent, you may be better off with a phone call.

24 Use cc: field sparingly

Try not to use the cc: field unless the recipient in the cc: field knows why they are receiving a copy of the message. It can be confusing since the recipients might not know who is supposed to act on the message. Also, when responding to a cc: message, should you include the other recipient in the cc: field as well? This will depend on the situation. In general, don't reply to the person in the cc: field unless you have a particular reason for wanting this person to see your response.

25 Answer all questions, and pre-empt further questions

If you don't answer all the questions in the original email, you will receive further emails regarding the unanswered questions, which will not only waste your time and your customer's time but also cause considerable frustration.

If there are multiple questions in an email, you can insert your response to each one at the relevant spot in the quoted message. This can make your answer more concise since you don't have to repeat the question and it's clear what you're responding to.

26 Don't forward virus hoaxes and chain letters

If you receive an email message warning you of a new unstoppable virus that will immediately delete everything from your computer, this is most probably a hoax. By forwarding hoaxes you use valuable bandwidth and sometimes virus hoaxes contain viruses themselves, by attaching a so-called file that will stop the dangerous virus. The same goes for chain letters that promise incredible riches or ask your help for a charitable cause. Even if the content seems to be bona fide, the senders are usually not. Since it is impossible to find out whether a chain letter is real or not, the best place for it is the recycle bin.

Check on snopes.com if you think something smells fishy.

27 Don't use email to discuss confidential information

Sending an email is like sending a postcard. If you don't want your email to be displayed on a bulletin board, don't send it. Moreover, never make any libelous, sexist or racially discriminating comments in emails, even if they are meant to be a joke. By sending or even just forwarding one libelous, or offensive remark in an email, you and your company can face court cases resulting in multi-million dollar penalties.

28 Add disclaimers to your emails

For a company with many employees, it is important to add disclaimers to your internal and external emails, since this can help protect your company from liability. Consider the following scenario: an employee accidentally forwards a virus to a customer by email. The customer decides to sue your company for damages. If you add a disclaimer at the bottom of every external email, saying that the recipient must check each email for viruses and that it cannot be held liable for any transmitted viruses, this will surely be of help to you in court. Another example: an employee sues the company for allowing a racist email to circulate the office. If your company has an email policy in place and adds an email disclaimer to every email that states that employees are expressly required not to make defamatory statements, you have a good case of proving that the company did everything it could to prevent offensive emails. A disclaimer can be saved as a signature if you don't have a way of formatting your email automatically.