"18 TOP TIPS FOR WRITING GREAT EMAIL"

Writing and sending email has become so common that most of us hardly think about it.

Unfortunately, that lack of thought often shows! From vague subject lines to poorly written, copious amounts of text, there are many ways that email can actually fail to deliver your message.

Email has many benefits. Indeed, sometimes nothing else will do. Email can keep multiple project participants informed at once. It allows you to be thorough and detailed. By having things written down, you can ensure better clarity among more people. Email also preserves a record of your progress, requests and agreements.

Email can save time, too. Typing out a one-line reply, for example, is faster than making a phone call. And email frees you from responding to a concern immediately, allowing you to focus your ideas before you reply.

But you need to keep in mind that email is not the only – or always the best – way to communicate.

In the Working Design studio, we've developed a number of guidelines to make sure we're communicating clearly. Herewith, our top rules for writing great email:

1   **IS THIS EMAIL NECESSARY?** Let's face it, sometimes it's better to just pick up the phone or have a quick face-to-face meeting. Writing an effective email can sometimes take more time than having a brief conversation. You may even find yourself avoiding personal contact (never a good habit in the workplace). Sometimes it's just better to call, or meet in person.

2   **WRITE AN INFORMATIVE AND ACCURATE SUBJECT LINE.** It's important that the purpose of your email is clear from the start. Writing no subject line at all isn't acceptable in business communication. Vague one word titles like "report" don't work, either. And avoid using old subject lines or threads to introduce new email. This just adds to the confusion.

3   **THINK AHEAD WHEN YOU WRITE YOUR SUBJECT LINE.** What will make it stand out?

Sometimes, a subject line may be all you need. For example, if you've been setting up a meeting and a date and time has been proposed, your subject line can simply note the date and time of the meeting. An email like this can be tagged with "EOM" at the end. This stands for "End Of Message" and lets the reader know there is no message in the body of the email. ("NFM" is also used and means "No Further Message".) Give this subject line exercise a try in your office. It can be a real time-saver!

4 **KEEPING TRACK OF AN EMAIL THREAD.** Some projects require a lot of back and forth among numerous people. Before you know it, your inbox has 27 messages with the title: "Re:Re:Re:Re:Appendix Info for ITI Health Report".

A good subject line will often contain some or all of the following, especially if the email is intended for a number of people on an ongoing project that spans your organization and others:

• the project or company name or acronym,

• the specific issue being addressed,

• some reference to time or project status,

• your company or personal name.

Here's how that might look:
"Appendix Info for ITI Health Report/ final draft / Elaine / Aug. 21 / 08"

However, that kind of detail isn't necessary if the email thread will be short and between a limited number of people. In order to keep track of the thread, it's important to preserve the main title.

5 **MAKE YOUR POINT RIGHT AWAY.** Generally speaking, there are three kinds of email: 1) information, 2) request for information, and 3) request for action. Make sure you address the main purpose of your email in the first one or two sentences, especially a request for a reply or action.

6 **KEEP IT BRIEF.** Email messages are most effective for brief communication. Reports and more involved communications are best attached as separate documents. Most readers will groan at an email note that fills their screen and beyond.

7 **KEEP IT SIMPLE.** Introducing more than one or two ideas in an email can lead to confusion. It can make it difficult for users to reply accurately and thoroughly, which may result in important points or questions not being properly addressed. Keep your email concise and to the point. Chances are good that the reply you receive will be just as concise.

8 **STAY ON TOPIC.** Just as you want to limit the number of ideas in your email, you should not mix topics, projects or anything else in your messages.

9 **MAKE IT QUOTABLE.** Some people prefer to quote and respond to specific sections or sentences in your message. By keeping your paragraphs short and concise you can help make this process easier.

10 **REMEMBER PARAGRAPHS?** Some emails arrive as one big chunk of text. The lack of paragraph breaks makes all reading difficult and especially so when it is on a computer screen. Set your email preferences so the text has line endings and the message fits nicely into the viewer's email window. This is a common courtesy and it's greatly appreciated by your reader.

11 PROOFREAD KAREFULLY. Poor grammar, incomplete sentences and typos will make your reader question your professionalism. Remember that, in the workplace, email is not a casual conversation -- it's a business letter. If the reader questions your professionalism, it may reflect badly on your commitment to them and may bring your credibility into question. The computer gods gave us spell-check -- use it!

12 TRIPLE-CHECK YOUR TONE. Email isn't the place to work out your stand up routine. Nor is it a place to pull rank. What may sound funny or authoritative to you (because it's your voice) may sound offensive or unnecessarily blunt to someone else. Make sure you strike a good balance between brevity and friendliness. There's nothing like a judicious use of exclamation marks and an emoticon or two to convey your mood and intent. (At Working Design, all important email messages going to clients are reviewed by at least one other person in the office.)

13 THINK TWICE BEFORE YOU HIT "SEND." Some email discussions can get complicated or testy. Conflict is better addressed in a different forum. Never send email when emotions are running high. Count to a thousand or go for lunch first.

14 KEEP IT CONFIDENTIAL. Email is a very public form of communication. Remember that anything you write can be very easily copied to hundreds of people. Don't write anything that will reflect badly on you or others. Personnel discussions have no place in email.

15 DOES THIS MESSAGE NEED A REPLY? Some email messages are sent for information only. You don't always need to reply. And when you're part of a group receiving emails, it can be useful to observe first, to watch a conversation or thread develop before weighing in with a comment.

16 "REPLY ALL" MAY BE ONE OF THE WORST INVENTIONS EVER! Does everyone in the email loop really need to receive your reply? Or is it more appropriate to reply just to the sender? "Reply All" can be a quick way to clog inboxes with meaningless and unnecessary mail. Always use "Reply All" with caution and restraint.

17 MAKING IT PRETTY. It can be tempting to use your email program's font style, colour and size palette, or to add a background colour or a wallpaper, to create emphasis and make your emails more eye-catching. But not all of your readers will see it the way you send it. Some email programs strip out this formatting entirely, while others can interpret it in strange ways, making it less readable. Play it safe and use minimal formatting. And make sure your email will still make sense if it's viewed as plain text.

18 IS IT OK TO GIVE A ONE WORD REPLY TO AN EMAIL? Yes.

■ "18 Top Tips for Writing Good Email" is one in an occasional series of discussion papers about communication and design from Working Design, a Vancouver, B.C.-based company. www.workingdesign.net