

What Has Happened to Face-to-Face Dialog? Getting Back to the Personal Basics

Over the past several weeks I've received numerous questions from Senior Executives on best practices for sending e-mails. E-mail has become the substitute for creating and maintaining interpersonal relationships. We've become lazy. How many of you have sent an e-mail to someone sitting next door to you or a few steps away within the past hour?

A study, reported in CEO Magazine, says more than 60% of employers rate high-school graduates' skills in basic English as fair or poor. This poor use of the English language is smattered throughout e-mails--a prevalent way for workers to communicate. "E-mail continues to be the 'killer app' of the internet," says the Pew Internet & American Life Project, Washington, D.C. "More people use e-mail than do any other activity online."

When choosing e-mail as your communication medium, the success of your message will depend on the following components.

- The message is not time-sensitive or urgent.
- The message is simple and the stakes are low.
- You have a strong, influential relationship with the recipient.
- Negotiating is not the purpose of the message.
- Conflict between you and the recipient does not exist.

Before you hit the send button, take the time to plan:

- Your purpose and objective
- Action you want your recipient to take and the level of influence your message will have
- Possible interpretations the recipient may have based on your writing style
- Results your message will have based on who will be receiving it

When deciding if e-mail is the **best** way to communicate your message and influence your recipient, consider the advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages

- It's a quick way to communicate a message and in some cases receive a response.
- E-mail is universal.
- It's cheap and easy.

Disadvantages

- Since e-mail is impersonal and does not express emotion, it can be a trap for misinterpretations. You don't have the opportunity to add emphasis or importance to words and to soften the message with your tone and facial expressions.
- Anyone with the right technical skills can gain access to your account.
- Because e-mail is quick and easy, we're too relaxed with the messages we send.
- We've become impersonal and hide behind e-mail, which begins to control our life. Suddenly the majority of your day-to-day interactions are through e-mail and you

jeopardize the relationships that you could enhance during a face-to-face or phone conversation.

Ten Best Practices

Enter the recipient's address last.

You don't want to accidentally press send when you have a half-written e-mail or if you have not completed the editing process.

When in doubt, do not send the e-mail.

Take the time for a face-to-face or phone conversation to create and maintain a relationship. Remember, when you send an e-mail message, it's there forever.

If you're sending an attachment, complete this step first.

How many times have you received a message from a sender without an attachment when the intention was to send one? Then seconds later you receive another message from the sender saying, "Oops, here you go." Avoid damaging your credibility.

Grab recipient's attention.

The subject line is what will prioritize your message above many others received. Keep it very short, specific and to the point.

Who's your recipient?

Avoid using CC for the entire office. Design your message to meet the needs of the recipient.

Never negotiate or discuss confidential information over e-mail.

If a question is raised that changes the tone of the message to a more critical or urgent response, do not send another e-mail. The dialogue needs the attention that can only be conveyed through a face-to-face conversation.

Be concise and to the point.

E-mail is a quick medium for communication. If your message resembles a dissertation, chances are the recipient won't read it. Keep e-mails to one subject and include no more than three key points per e-mail.

Always use spell check.

E-mails with misspelled words and no commas are difficult to read and change the meaning of the text.

Take action.

To encourage a recipient's response, ask open-ended questions and set specific deadline dates if action is required. This is one of the most important methods of reducing the number of e-mails you receive.

Answer all questions.

By not answering all the questions in the original e-mail, you'll receive another one regarding the unanswered questions, and that likely will create frustration and wasted time.

Just because the Internet offers a fast way to communicate, doesn't mean you should shoot off an e-mail without taking the time to make sure it's free of spelling or grammatical errors and that your message is clear.

(If you want additional information on e-mail etiquette, please contact me and I'll send more your way. Check out our [Business Essential Tips](#))

Stacey Hanke is the president of 1st Impression Consulting, Inc. Stacey is a speaker and author of several books including Yes You Can! Everything You Need From A To Z To Influence Others To Take Action. Her website is www.1stimpressionconsulting.com. Stacey can be reached at 312.955.0380 or stacey.hanke@1stimpressionconsulting.com.

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