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E-mail 101

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In every small business, time is money. But so, in fact, is text. Before you hit 'Send' on your next message, consider these tips for being a better e-mailer.

By: MATT ALDERTON

Cherie Kerr was in Philadelphia on business when she decided, once and for all, that e-mail was out of control. Boarding a plane home, she received an e-mail update from her assistant on her handheld. It read, "Only a few items," and presented in bulleted form a quick summary of the day's missed messages.



Photo by: iStockphoto

"She said, 'So-and-so called and wants to have lunch,'" Kerr recalls, "and, 'So-and-so wants to meet next week, instead,' and then, 'Oh, and also, your sister e-mailed to say that your cousin's husband died instantly on Saturday.'"

Kerr was floored. Unable to call home, lest she miss her plane, she was left to ponder during her cross-country flight how e-mail communication had come so far—and stooped so low.

"I was thinking," she says, "'How did we get from calling somebody, or giving bad news in person, to obit by e-mail?'"

Kerr, founder and president of [ExecuProv](#), a Santa Ana, Calif.-based communication training company, decided that reckless e-mailers, like reckless drivers, needed a rulebook. So, she decided to write one. The resulting tome, *The Bliss or "Diss" Connection? Email Etiquette for the Business Professional*, is a Bible for e-mail addicts and click-happy business owners.

"The very thing that's supposed to keep us connected is actually one of the things that's isolating us," Kerr says. And for small businesses in particular, isolation is deadly.

Make sure your e-mail is connecting you, not cutting you off, by paying close attention to when you e-mail, what you e-mail and how you e-mail.

The Case for—and Against—E-mail

Most professionals spend 30 percent of their day reading and writing e-mails, according to e-mail etiquette and efficiency expert Mike Song, co-founder of [Cohesive Knowledge Solutions](#), a Guilford, Conn.-based e-mail training company. Co-author of *The Hamster Revolution: How to Manage Your E-mail Before It Manages You*, he suggests that e-mail is at once helpful and harmful.

"E-mail is an extraordinarily effective tool for distributing information to large groups of people," Song says. "It's a terrible tool for trying to hold a discussion with a group, it's a terrible tool for any type of sensitive information and it's a terrible tool for any type of highly emotional content; whether it's anger or sarcasm, it's prone to misinterpretation and it really backfires on the sender."

E-mail is easy, sure. But perhaps it's *too* easy, experts say. "It's the No. 1 communication tool that's used in the business world today," Song points out, "but people are not considering the impact that a sloppy e-mail has, and they're eroding their own professional image."

Indeed, an e-mail says more than the content of its message. Whether you intend it to or not, an e-mail says something about your brand identity, about your level of customer and client service, about the quality of your work and about your ability to get things done quickly and correctly.

"People look at it as a chore sometimes to really pay attention to their e-mails," Song says. "It's an investment, though. It's your face to the public, and as a business owner you cannot really ignore it."

Be a Better Writer

Naturally, better e-mails start with better writing. "People have to read you," Kerr says. "So, you have to be a really good writer."

That's not to say that you have to send the equivalent of Shakespearean prose from your inbox. You do, however, have to send messages that are clear and concise, well organized and error free.

First of all, Kerr urges, "Edit all your e-mails for proper grammar, punctuation and spelling." Avoid using all caps—a common sign of aggression—and stay away from shorthand, too, including text message exclamations like "LOL" and emoticons such as the infamous smiley face.

"Try to be more professional," Song says.

Of course, good writing isn't all about proper spelling. Just as important, Song points out, is proper structure. "People have no concept in their minds of how they're going to structure their ideas," he says, "and that's what makes e-mail so frustrating to readers."

Every e-mail you send should have a beginning—get to the point and state right away your reason for sending the message—a middle and an end. The beginning is where you put your action items and the middle where you present background information and details, preferably in the form of scanner-friendly bullet points. Save your niceties and next steps for the end and never leave potential questions unanswered.

Oh, and don't forget your subject line and signature. Those have to be well written, too.

"You want to get your messages opened and acted upon," Song says. Getting them opened requires a strong and super specific subject line—"Instead of writing, 'Notes,'" he suggests, "write, 'Important Action Items for Research and Development Team Meeting, April 3'"—while getting them acted upon necessitates an auto signature that includes all of your contact information.

Professional or Personal?

According to Song, most e-mails would benefit from a touch more professionalism. "I think that e-mail in a business setting should be more formal than it is," he says. That doesn't mean that you have to be completely buttoned up at your keyboard, but it does mean remembering that it's clients—not friends—on the receiving end of your outbox.

Still, Kerr argues, e-mail leaves more room than most business communications for a personal touch. "Attach some personality to your e-mails," she recommends.

You can inject personality into your messages with unique word choices, with less formal salutations and oftentimes, just by using complete sentences. That means no more one- or two-word replies. "A lot of responses I see are things like, 'Shouldn't be a problem,' or, 'Sounds good,'" Song says. These kinds of replies don't say anything, and often have a blunt effect that either lacks personality or—unintentionally—has a hostile one.

"Sometimes, e-mail is the only thing people see," Kerr says. "That's how you make your impression. So what you put out there has to have a tone, it has to have your personality."

Send Less, Get Less

The final rule in being a good e-mailer, Song and Kerr agree, is sending less of it. "Send now, send later, but don't send all the time," Kerr says.

According to Song, people's No. 1 complaint with e-mail is that people overuse the "Reply To All" button. He therefore recommends avoiding it, along with the urge to cc, whenever possible. "Do whatever you can to reduce e-mail volume," he says. "There's a tremendous payback here, because as people become more judicious with e-mail, they save themselves a lot of time; my clients have saved as many as 10 or 15 days per person, per year."

So, what should you do with all your extra time? Try picking up the phone.

"You can't sit behind a computer and just send messages all day to people and not talk to them," Kerr says. "One of my rules is for every third e-mail, the fourth time, pick up the phone. Call somebody."


And if you have bad news? Maybe it's finally time for some face time.

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