



[DR. SHIRLEY SAYS...]

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E-mail: Overused and abused?

During the past decade or so, e-mail has become the lifeblood of modern business communication. E-mail is now as necessary as the telephone for the average working man and woman. In fact, in some situations, e-mail has become more important than the telephone, fax and pager for connecting distance organizations across time zones and cultures.

These days, e-mail users can be found in most places of business and across the entire spectrum of workers. It is even rare these days to exchange business cards without an imprinted e-mail address, usually right below or next to the telephone number.

I think most of us will agree that e-mail matters, and it matters big time. E-mail enables us to conduct business most effectively and efficiently, as well as stay in touch with family and friends to whom we might otherwise talk only a few times a year. Even my 85-year-old mother has e-mail capabilities. She loves it.

As with other technology, there seems to be a growing trend to abuse the use of e-mail. Though e-mail is an informal method of communicating, some basic rules of style do apply. Let's take a look at a few:

➤ Don't type in all caps. This can be perceived as shouting and is also difficult to read.

➤ Type in upper- and lower-case letters as you would in a memo or other piece of correspondence.

➤ Avoid making mistakes in grammar, spelling, sentence structure and punctuation in e-mail. Errors may be considered rude because the recipient could possibly have difficulty reading and understanding the message. It also

sends a negative impression of you and your organization.

➤ E-mail is not a vehicle for lengthy treatises. Messages should be direct, concise and succinct. This way, they will be read, and the probability is high that you will get a response.

➤ Do not get caught up in the traditional e-mail culture of abbreviating and using acronyms and characters. E-mail in business is for communicating, and many users will not know the meaning of character messages, such as BTW (by the way). Abbreviations are distracting, confusing and reduce the effectiveness and productivity of this form of communicating.

➤ Business e-mail salutations depend on the circumstances and how personal the e-mail is. A first name, a Dear Mr. or Ms. and last name, or no name at all are acceptable, depending on how formal you prefer to be. As a rule, as you would address a paper letter, for example, Dear Mr. Smith, you should address e-mail in the same manner.

➤ The close of an e-mail message reflects the balance between brevity and intimacy with the recipient. Although a closing can contain just your first name, in more formal instances you may want to use the same format as regular correspondence.

Write descriptive subject lines. Use the subject line wisely to summarize your message and inform the reader why your message should be read as a priority among the other 125 messages they received that day.

➤ Only forward business-related messages. Jokes, quotes, stories, etc. are better saved for personal e-mail addresses. It can be very time-consum-

ing to have to scroll through numerous superfluous forwarded e-mail.

➤ You can use emoticons — “smileys” or “ ” — when trying to convey a tone of voice, but use them sparingly.

➤ Proofread your e-mail before you send it. Although e-mail is a more informal method of communication than a letter, be sure you make your point clear and concise. Use a spell checker if available.

➤ Be careful when addressing mail. There are addresses that may go to a group, but the address looks like it is just one person. Know to whom you are sending your e-mail.

➤ Be wary of to whom you are replying, or sending copies of the e-mail. Don't continue to include other people if the messages have become a two-way conversation.

➤ Remember that when communicating with others across the globe, if you send a message to which you want an immediate response, the person receiving it might be at home asleep when the e-mail arrives. Give them a chance to wake up, get to work and login before assuming the e-mail did not arrive. Perhaps telephoning would be a better way to go.

➤ Finally, consider carefully what you write. Remember, it's a permanent record, and could possibly be considered evidence in litigation. E-mail is not the proper medium for confidential messages or extremely personal messages. Always ask the question, “Would I enjoy seeing my message on the front page of the local daily newspaper?”

For more information, please contact Dr. White at (225) 769-2307. □