



E-mail Manners

AUGUST, 2010

I was trying to decide what to write about this month when one of my co-workers mentioned a study he'd recently read on e-mail etiquette. What further confirmed the timeliness of this topic was when, just a few hours later, I was called into my employer's office and gently reprimanded for the tone of an e-mail I had sent earlier that day!

The offending e-mail had been sent to a supplier who repeatedly fails to deliver what we ask for and consistently bills us incorrectly. I had quickly rattled off a message that cut straight to the facts because I wanted to tidy up my books by the end of the day. In my haste, however, I failed to wrap it in introductory pleasantries and a proper salutation. In my mind, I was continuing the conversation I had previously had over the 'phone with the supplier—a conversation I was still somewhat irritated about.

More and more of us are substituting e-mail for old-fashioned letter writing and even telephone conversations: it's expedient, instant and free. It lies somewhere between traditional written correspondence and instant messaging. The care required in crafting a well-written letter forces us to slow down and choose our words carefully. In today's office environment, however, quantity is readily substituted for quality and we are churning out dozens of e-mails in a day—some of them are just a phrase or two, others are more substantial.

Whether we are keyboard virtuosos, or one-finger typists, it's easy to hit the 'send' button without giving much thought to how our messages will be received. As my parents used to say (more often than I care to recall), 'it's not *what* you say, it's *how* you say it'.

As with all evolving social and business media, a few basic rules and standards are required. Here are some that I, for one, promise to follow from now on:

1. Dear Me ... don't forget to include an introductory salutation and, wherever, possible, include the name of the person to whom the e-mail is being sent.
2. RSVP ... it takes a couple of seconds to send a brief acknowledgement or 'thank you' for any e-mails you receive and it reassures the sender that his/her message isn't floating around unclaimed somewhere in cyberspace.

3. DON'T WRITE IN BLOCK CAPITALS – people will think you are shouting at them!

4. don't write in all lower case either – i think it is unprofessional and makes the message seem rather juvenile.

5. Similarly, don't toss in those annoying little 'emoticons' - :), or (:, or those obscure abbreviations borrowed from the texting generation. For the longest time, I thought 'LOL' meant 'lots of love' and couldn't understand why people I barely knew were including it in their e-mails to me. OMG, was I wrong!

6. No chain mail - no matter who sent it to you or how threatening it is. If three bad things are going to happen to you that day if you trash the message, they'll probably happen anyway.

7. Use attachments sparingly. Most importantly, if you are applying for a position via e-mail, use your cover letter as the body of your e-mail message. You want to get the attention of your potential employer quickly. You can always attach a printable version of your cover letter so that it will look nice in the file.

8. If you are sending an e-mail to a number of people who perhaps don't want their e-mail addresses read by everyone, make sure you Bcc (blind carbon copy) the message, not Cc.

9. Subject: blank? – choose your subject line well, particularly if you want the recipient to open your message.

10. Office e-mails are NOT a good place to entertain gossip and speculation. Meet at the water cooler if you must.

11. Never cry wolf – designate your message 'urgent' only if it really is.

12. Choose your e-mail address carefully. A job enquiry from 'ginslinger@hotmail.com' is appropriate only if you are applying for a bar tending position.

13. Before you hit 'send', read it!

14. Finally, here's the tough one – your tone of voice. Type is pretty cold and clinical. Attempts at subtle humour are usually best avoided unless you know the recipient very well. Even if you are not a proficient typist, don't omit the niceties; 'please' and 'thank you' can soften even the most punctilious messages.

Thank you!