

Email Etiquette – More Than Just Manners

By: Angela Nielsen – President/Creative Director



We all understand the importance of good “people skills” when it comes to our interpersonal communication – it helps us get the results we need. Our communication determines the opinion others have of us – knowledgeable or ignorant, pleasant or rude, professional or immature. Most of the time this is in face-to-face or telephone conversations where we have some control over the impression we make on others.

When it comes to netiquette (Network Etiquette), it’s not as easy to control how others perceive us, and yet it’s even more important. Why? Because what you write and how you use email can affect whether your email gets delivered, read, or responded to – and what that response is! In addition, there are numerous “technology traps” that are easy to fall into. Have you ever seen someone accidentally send an angry or sensitive response to a huge group of people by using the “Reply All” key?

And before you say to yourself “I already know” and stop reading this article, realize that every single one of us could benefit from a few simple reminders on the proper use of email, not just from a personal view but also from a business standpoint. If you’re doing business on the internet – and using email to communicate with your customers – then this article is a must read for you! You may already know many of these tips, but even the most experienced user will find a few rules you were not aware of or have fallen into the habit of breaking.

Think, write, and think again.

Email is a static, one-way channel – unlike live communication, there’s no way to get immediate feedback (from facial expressions or voice responses) to know if we are being effective or even understood. So think twice before hitting the send key. Is there ANY chance that the recipient might misinterpret what you want them to understand? Do your thoughts come across as abrupt or angry? Could this email accidentally affect your reputation? The hastily written word may lack feelings and the true emotion you intended. You might be smiling as you type, but your note could come across as sarcastic or mean-spirited. Remember – there’s a person on the other end, not just a computer.

Use a meaningful subject line.

This is the first thing your reader will see, so use the space to help them understand the contents of the email even before they open it. Using the same rule from above, type in a subject that relates to the message you’re sending, rather than leaving the subject blank. Without a subject line your note will probably be seen as another piece of junk mail – not everyone will recognize who you are just from your email address. Many internet service providers (ISP’s) filter out suspicious looking email, and a blank subject is a big red flag. Also, try to avoid generic words like “Hi” or “Check This Out” to avoid having the recipients spam or virus software delete your message!

The beginning, and the end.

Always use a salutation, even if it’s short. Start your message with “Hi”, or “Hello”, or “Dear”, whatever works best for the intended recipient, and whatever reflects your personality. Think about this: when you call someone on the telephone, don’t you say “Hello” before telling them what you want? Email messages should be no different. At a minimum, address the email to the person.

Don’t forget the end of your message too! Always sign your messages with your name, and say “Thank You”, or “Sincerely”, or something else appropriate. You can even setup a signature in your email program that will automatically display your information at the bottom of every email message you send. For directions, use your email programs help file and do a search for signature.

Protect your recipient’s identity – use “To:”, “CC:” and “BC:” properly.

There are a few simple netiquette rules for using the address fields in email.

If your email is being sent to just one person or email address, place it in the “To:” field. This should be the person who

is responsible for sending you a reply.

When your email is being sent to more than one person and all the recipients truly need to know who else is receiving it, put all the addresses in the "CC:" field.

For email sent to multiple recipients who have no real reason to know the names and email addresses of everyone else to whom it is being sent, put all the addresses in the "BCC:" field.

(Some email software requires at least one address to be placed in the "To:" field. Put your own email address in the "To:" section if this is required.)

By default, not every email program has the BCC field available for viewing. If you cannot see the Bcc field in your program, check your programs help file for directions.

Give memory a helping hand.

When replying to emails, include a copy of the prior notes you've traded with the person on the topic, don't just send a new one. I may receive 50 emails a day that need a reply and it's not always possible to remember every single 'conversation' with every single person. Please don't make your reader go looking through their 'sent items' folder or email 'recycle bin' to refresh their memory!

Use the 'Read Receipt' sparingly.

In some cases, it's crucial for both parties to know that a message was received. However, in normal day-to-day activities you should not request a read receipt for every single message you send. It's annoying to the recipient to have to click that pop up box every time they get your email. And it is an invasion of privacy. Don't forget – just because they have received it doesn't mean they have necessarily read it, so receiving a read receipt doesn't actually prove anything other than that the message was received. And for day to day communications, is that really necessary?

URGENT!

The boy who cried wolf. Do not send all your messages as URGENT, or HIGH PRIORITY. If your recipients keep receiving messages marked that way, then eventually the red exclamation point loses its effectiveness – except to reinforce how important YOU think you are. Reserve these messages for those that are of utmost importance!

Avoid special formatting.

For your day-to-day messages, don't use colored email backgrounds, colored fonts, special fonts, images or other "pretty" type of formatting to your messages. Keep them clean – this makes it easier for the intended recipient to read them and reply. It's best to send messages in plain text to ensure everyone will be able to read them, since not everyone has their email set to receive html emails. You would be amazed at how bad your note may look to someone viewing their email on a handheld device or an older computer. By keeping your emails clean, they will also load much faster for the recipient!

Don't SHOUT!

If you type in all capital letters, your reader will see this as yelling, or they will think that you were just too lazy to use proper text formatting. It's also hard on the eyes – did you know that it takes longer to read something written in all caps than it does to read something that is properly formatted?

Proof, spell-check, and use proper formatting.

Poor writing skills are a direct reflection on you! And the reader never forgets the person who writes an undecipherable message. Spell checking will prevent most misspelled words, but you should always proof your email in case you've written the incorrect word (that was spelled correctly). For example, month and moth, where and were, all look correct to a spell-check program. Use proper capitalization, punctuation and formatting. Break your paragraphs when the subject changes, or if they become too long. Don't use excessive formatting (too much bold, too many exclamation points and question marks, etc.) Too much of anything will make your message harder to read. You want to make your message easily readable, as well as understandable. Proofread it to ensure it makes sense, and never assume the reader knows what you mean, always spell it out for them. The time it takes to proof and spell check is minimal compared to the lasting impression you will make if you don't take the time.

Take the time to send a reply.

Even when someone emails you something that doesn't need a direct response, follow up with them in a timely manner just to let them know you received their message. It's amazing how often people will ask for advice, and not even reply with a short "Thank you" when they receive their answer. A simple message telling the sender is sufficient. And this lets them know you did receive it, that it didn't just get stuck in cyberspace somewhere.

If they didn't request it, don't send it!

No matter what you think may be acceptable, you cannot email someone about your product/service without their permission. Unless they request that you send them an email, or you have previously done business with them, then it is illegal to send them an email, period. Any recipient can easily forward your email to their ISP and report you for sending unsolicited email messages (SPAM).

This report would result in the immediate removal of all your websites/email address from most servers. You would then join a list of "prohibited senders" meaning that servers would not allow any messages attached to your domain name to be received by their customers - the people you are sending your messages to.

You might be thinking, "but I get emails every day about products/services that I didn't request information about." Sending unsolicited email messages (SPAM), is kind of like speeding. Lots of people do it, but it is against the law, and no matter how long you may get away with it, you are bound to get caught!

Compress, Compress, Compress!

If you are sending an email with several large attachments, it is often better to send them in a few separate emails, so that you don't send a document that is too large to even open. Or, you can try compressing your messages into a zipped file. It doesn't reduce the size of images or pictures very much, but it works great for text, spreadsheet and program files. This is very easy to do, and will make your file size much smaller, and make the recipient much happier. Check out www.winzip.com (for those on pc).

Hoaxes as helpful hints.

If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Do not forward everything that gets sent to you. We've all seen them – the chain-letter emails that promise if you forward to x number of people you'll get paid, or you'll win something, or you will be lucky forever. It's all a hoax, a scam, and the only result is huge numbers of email transmissions that slow down servers all across the country. If you receive one of these emails from a friend, reply to them (in a very nice way) and explain to them why this isn't true, or ask them to stop forwarding them to you.

Virus, or virus advice?

Many viruses are spread by email masquerading as warnings about – a virus! If someone forwards you a virus warning, which usually contains instructions for removing a virus from your computer... check google.com for that virus BEFORE doing anything. Chances are, it's also a hoax, and if you do remove that "bad file" from your computer, you're actually removing a necessary component crucial to your system!

Wow, that was a lot of information to take in at one time, but I congratulate you for sticking it out and reading the entire article. Please share it with your family, friends and colleagues.

About the Author: Angela Nielsen is President of One Lily Inc., an award-winning web development company located in southern California. To find out more about Angela Nielsen or One Lily visit www.onelily.com. Copyright by Angela Nielsen, All Rights Reserved.