Don't Hit Send! Avoid These Common Email Pet Peeves
By Jean Maslanka Kelley

Spam…email chain letters…obnoxious or off-color jokes…these are just a few things that annoy business professionals when it comes to daily email. While you're likely not sending any of these things, what if your emails to people are just as annoying?

Unfortunately, many people are unknowingly irritating co-workers and clients with bad email etiquette and habits. Even worse, the offenders are tarnishing their reputations in the process, unaware that their emails reflect their personal and company brand, their image, and their credibility.

If you've ever wondered why people don't take action on your emails or why this productivity tool seems to waste more of your time than it saves, you may be guilty of exhibiting a few email pet peeves. Following are the top five email pet peeves in the workplace. Avoid them so your email messages are most effective.

1. Having sensitive conversations via email.

Sensitive and emotionally charged conversations have no place in an email. If you need to fire someone, express disappointment, or apologize, do it face-to-face (most preferred) or via phone. When a topic has emotion behind it, the recipient naturally escalates that emotion when reading the email. Why? Because it's virtually impossible to display emotion in an email (aside from some carefully placed emoticons, which not everyone appreciates), and humans by nature look for the worst in a message rather than the best. So your innocent question of "Why did you call Mr. Smith?" gets read as an accusatory question, as if you had asked, "Why on earth did *you* of all people call Mr. Smith and bother him?"

Adding fuel to the fire is the fact that many people write things in an email that they would never say in person. They view email as a way to have "safe" conflict without being face-to-face. So they may snap back at someone in a sarcastic way or slam someone professionally or personally. Some people even enjoy this type of conflict, as it gives them a charge. The bottom line is that if your message has any type of intense emotion behind it, don't send the email. The matter is best addressed in a face-to-face meeting or phone call.

2. Using "reply all" versus "reply."

Just because you were one of many recipients on a message does not mean everyone needs to hear your reply. For example, a supervisor may send a group message out to the entire department asking who will be present at the quarterly meeting. The only person who needs to see your response is the person who initiated the message, not the entire group. If the group contains 100 people and each one does a "reply all" saying, "I'll be there," you'll have a very cluttered inbox and 100 annoyed people.

Therefore, really think about who needs to see the message before you reply. Obviously, if your company requires that you do a "reply all" for business emails, then by all means do so. Otherwise, use the "reply all" button judiciously. And remember that with a "reply all," everyone, even someone who was in the BCC line, will see your comments. So you never really know who is getting your message.

3. Using poor grammar and spelling.

A typo every now and then is not a big deal. However, consistent bad grammar and spelling is obnoxious. Email is a form of written communication, so respect the written word. Additionally, this is business, and everything you do, say, and write is a reflection of your professionalism.

When people read your messages, they naturally and automatically make a judgment about you based on your writing. If your writing is poor, everything else about you is in question. After all, if you don't care enough about your writing, what else don't you care about? Your product? Your service? The reader? Remember that the written word stays out there forever, and no email message is ever really deleted permanently. Make sure your lasting impressions are good ones – even when you email.

4. Emailing complicated information.

If you have to give someone technical, detailed, or complicated information, do it with a phone call and an email as a backup rather than relying solely on the email communication. Email is best suited for short messages that don't require a lengthy response. If your email is more than a couple of paragraphs, pick up the phone and talk to the recipient. Use the follow up email to send needed documentation or a recap of your verbal instructions, but don't expect people to read and act upon a lengthy or complicated message.

Additionally, if you are the recipient of a detailed message and need time to work on the reply, send back a short acknowledgment message that states, "I received your message and am working on the needed items." And if the reply requires real discussion, then pick up the phone and talk about it. Don't rely on email for every topic.

5. Writing bad subject lines or not using subject lines.

Unless you're doing email marketing and relying on your messages to sell people, use straightforward subject lines that reflect the true theme of the message. Leave the cute and clever wording to the marketers. For day-to-day business purposes, plain and direct work best. So rather than have a subject line that reads, "Want to pick your brain," write, "Need your input on the Jones project."

Realize, too, that many people use their email as a filing system, and they rely on the subject lines to find key information later. So if all your subject lines are vague (as in "A message from Tom Smith" or "Info you requested"), or if you don't use subject lines, people won't know what the message was about when they search their files later. So always write detailed subject lines, as in "Dates for Singapore conference" or "Files for Smith project." And should the email's subject change as the conversation ensues, then change the subject line to reflect the new theme.

Get Your Message Across

Email has certainly come a long way in the past couple decades. What was initially viewed as a novel way to share key information in the 1990s is now the preferred method of business communication. But remember, just because something is commonplace and expected doesn't mean you can become lazy with it. Always use email properly and for the purposes and subjects it was intended. By doing so, not only will you avoid these pet peeves, but you'll also gain productivity rewards as you enhance your professional reputation.

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