

Email: Overused, Abused and Invaluable

BY G.A. ANDY MARKEN

It's true. Emotions don't travel well in the written form. A smile, a wink of the eye, a smirk, a furled brow are fine for face-to-face communications but they are completely missing when you use email. Despite the hype and global business promises of the Web, the most used, most useful and most misused Internet tool is email.

It has changed the way we work. Meetings become less frequent. Vendors, remote office personnel and customers instantly communicate with each other around the globe. Email has done more than any other technology to reduce the amount of paper an office uses.

Email is faster than conventional postal delivery and as dependable. Shortly after you hit the "Send" button the information is usually received by your "target audience."

In fact, Postmaster General Martin Runyon predicts that the giant quasi-government enterprise will lose about \$1.4 billion in 1998, due in no small part to the increasing use of Internet email. According to the USPS nearly 40 percent of business and personal correspondence already bypasses the postal service over the Internet.

Recently the General Services Administration (GSA) surveyed federal users and found that they considered email more effective than faxing, voice mail, telephone, regular mail, video conferencing and even personal meetings.

Email has taken off so rapidly in business that when an email server, network or Internet provider's connection goes down people wonder how they can get in touch with someone. They also wonder how long before they can get to their incoming mail.

Or as one person commented recently, "If someone I need to get in touch with doesn't have an email address I probably don't need to talk to him."

But like any valuable business tool people often don't understand how to use it properly or quickly find ways to abuse its use. In fact, the Electronic Messaging Association estimates that more than 94 million users will send over 5.5 trillion email messages in 1999.

DOING OUR PART

You and I both know we are major contributors. Just as many firms have carried out aggressive direct mail programs of shotgunning sales materials through the postal service, people are becoming numb to the email messages they receive. Some (especially editors and reporters) say they dump gigabytes of email every week into the electronic trash bin.

With the increasing use of push technology, the application of spam junkmail and the growing use of single keystroke email mailing lists, each of us has to be concerned that we will dull the value of this important communications tool.

EMAIL DON'TS

- ◆ Don't use email emotionally. I've been criticized a few times when a tongue-in-cheek comment didn't quite come across in an email. Since email lacks the immediate feedback and verbal nuances of the spoken word, don't use it when you are joking or are angry. Rather than a flame-mail response, talk to the person face to face or at least over the phone.

- ◆ Email should be avoided in a supervisor-subordinate or customer/vendor "issues" discussions. Verbal communications gives the benefit of immediate feedback. Both parties can understand how the message is being received either by the listener's facial expressions or the tone of his voice.

- ◆ Avoid the automobile cocoon syndrome. Just as some people tend to become more aggressive with their driving because they are anonymous and remote behind the wheel, the same can happen with email. Numerous articles have been written regarding the "interesting" email being received with remarks people would never say in person.

- ◆ Don't spam. Spamming or sending an announcement in a shotgun manner is not only discourteous to people inside and outside your organization but it is insulting as well.

My company uses an active database of about 3,000 email addresses. Some are used only once a month — when the message is just right. On the other hand, certain individual's addresses (key customers, regular suppliers, remote office workers) are used daily and weekly. When we develop a conference or status report it may go to as few as three or four people. When it's an announcement for a client it may go to 200 to 300 people around the globe. But each time the specific person is individually selected to receive the message. I don't read spammed messages so why should I expect someone else to read my spammed email message just because I'm too lazy to individualize the mailing? Besides, if recent legislative interest is any indication there may be stiff limitations and penalties levied for people who insist on "direct mailing" their announcements to the global Internet community.

- ◆ Use the bullet-proof Internet email test. If you aren't willing to have your email printed in tomorrow's paper or you wouldn't make the same comments in public, don't write them. That

includes off-color jokes, sexist or racist language or anything that can be construed as contributing to a hostile environment. Email messages are about as private as if they were posted in your favorite restaurant.

- ◆ If you are sending private company information and want to protect your message from accidentally going to the wrong person or being intercepted by someone, you can encrypt your email. Encryption (there are a variety of forms available) makes the message unreadable until it is decrypted by the recipient. However, use encryption sparingly. Unless you are only working on top-secret projects and programs there's no reason to over-secure everything you send across the Internet.
- ◆ Think before you use the Send button. You've seen TV episodes where someone accidentally sends a love letter meant for a particular person to the entire mailing list. There have been news reports of department heads sending staff salary data to everyone on the organization's distribution list. Product launch plans and company business plans have been accidentally sent to editors and reporters. These are disasters. But to a lesser degree, each of us has sent an email to someone only to discover "immediately" after it left that it didn't have the attachments you mentioned, or the attachments were sent in a form that couldn't be read by the intended recipient. At that point, your only recourse is to apologize and resend the message/attachments.

Speaking of attachments, the general rule should be that unless the recipient knows what you are sending don't send it. People I interviewed for this column hate it when they open a "general delivery" email and the attachment automatically copies to their hard drive. It's a waste of time to leave one storage area to open another, open the file and then determine the information that was sent is a waste of time and should be simply trashed. Worse yet most are gun-shy about receiving "strange" attachments. The reason? It's an easy way to transmit viruses that can destroy a few files or an entire hard drive of information.

For example, a few months ago I received a mailing list from a convention management organization. Every time we opened the file it released a virus that would eat up a file. No matter how often we ran anti-virus software against the file it would reappear. The only solution was to print out the entire file, delete the file and re-input the information.

Safe computing practice mandates that whenever you receive an attachment with an .EXE, .BAT or .COM extension you should run anti-virus software against the file before you open it. It's great in theory and it works ... unfortunately, few of us practice safe computing. As a result, most editors tell us they automatically delete the attachments rather than take a chance of destroying everything on their hard drive.

- ◆ Since there are so many different email and word or presentation packages available it is also difficult to make certain the recipient has the same software (and version) you do so they can open and view the attachment. You're better off simply pasting the message into the body of your email correspondence as ASCII text. It won't look as pretty but both parties can be assured the message is received.
- ◆ Practice good netiquette and don't send spoof emails. Spoofed messages are those that are sent with false header information that disguises the sender. If you're not proud enough of your work or your company perhaps you should find a new career or a new company.


EMAIL DO'S

- ◆ Use email whenever possible. From a management perspective it's significantly less expensive than sending the average business letter. And as I noted before it is faster — almost instantaneous.
- ◆ In addition to personalizing who is receiving your announcement, be very descriptive in the subject area of your email. Putting something bland or non-descriptive in the subject area makes it very easy for the person to quickly hit the delete button or file it for later review. Instead, make the subject informative, inviting and sometimes even intriguing.

Many people today receive numerous email messages daily. They don't have the time or desire — and I would suspect the inclination — to wade through every email to find the one or two bits of information they need. Think of their email screen as a billboard and you have less than five seconds to capture their attention.

- ◆ If you're sending an email format it properly and even though it is somewhat of a relaxed way to communicate write using good English. There's no excuse for poor writing.
- ◆ Regardless of which email program you use or whether it's for internal, external or combination usage you should thoroughly train your staff in the ins and outs, do's and don'ts, capabilities and faults and the company's general guidelines, policies and procedures before everyone is email-enabled. For security and HR purposes, some firms have established a program of monitoring and reviewing email. If your firm has such a policy make certain everyone clearly understands the policy, the reasons for the policy and the ramifications of inappropriate email conduct.

The Web may get all the glory but it's email that gets results when it's used properly. The Internet and email are excellent tools for responding to and working with all of your organization's stakeholders including customers, dealers, employees, investors, security analysts, suppliers and special interest groups.

Or as someone recently said, "The Internet should really be viewed as communications on steroids. It's the ultimate one-on-one communications tool." 

G.A. "Andy" Marken is president of Marken Communications, Inc., Santa Clara, Calif. He has 25 years of experience in the public relations/advertising field, supporting firms in the electronics and instrumentation industries, and the personal business computer system industries.

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