



A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION

“Oops!”

Did I Send That In My E-mail?

By Sherry Budziak and Anne Allodi

Have you ever quickly written then sent an e-mail to someone, only to think **“Oops! I didn’t mean to send that!”**? Most likely the answer is, **“Yes, more times than I care to remember!”**

The speed and broadcasting ability of electronic communication make it fundamentally different from paper-based communications. The ability to quickly write and send has enabled e-mail to become more of a conversation vehicle than traditional paper-based communication. On paper, you must make everything completely clear because your reader may not have a chance to respond and ask for clarification. With e-mail documents, your recipient can interact and ask questions. Therefore, e-mail tends to resemble conversation and can be sloppier than paper communications.

Many of us have stories about e-mail mistakes. One association professional recalled a senior executive who sent an e-mail attachment with detailed opinions about personnel. While they were able to immediately retract the message, this could have caused much harm to the senior executive, the staff and the organization. This may have been prevented by reviewing the attachment prior to sending the e-mail. What are other colleagues saying about e-mail?

Brad Claxton, CAE, past chairman of the Forum and former CEO of the American Academy of Dermatology says, "Do not use computer shorthand. An example is my grandson who signed off his communication with 'cya.' This was shorthand for 'see you.' However, for older folk, military personnel and bureaucrats, 'cya' has a very different connotation: cover your a__."

Remember the old communication adage ... *know your audience*. While it might be popular to use abbreviations like LOL, BRB, and BTW, many people do not understand these abbreviations and your workplace correspondence should be more formal. E-mails, whether business or personal, are an extension of you and your organization. Make them reflect your personal standards, e.g. complete sentences, proper grammar and capitalization, and, of course, correct spelling.

Ten Tips for Effective E-mail Communications

1. Check e-mail addresses carefully:
Hastily sending an e-mail, especially when your e-mail program automatically fills in the address, can lead to

embarrassment or inappropriately sending it to a member instead of a staff person.

2. If you are sending targeted e-mails to segments of the membership, always double check the lists to be sure the correct message is going to the correct audience. Steve Stahr, CAE, public relations director at the Million Dollar Round Table, provided the following example. "I received an e-mail thanking me for attending a meeting I did not attend. When I replied that I did not attend the meeting, I received an apology and an explanation. The organization had planned to send two e-mails: one to meeting attendees thanking them and one to folks who did not attend encouraging them to visit the Web site to see what they missed (as a way of promoting future attendance). Unfortunately, the messages and lists got switched."
3. E-mail in the workplace is a formal means of communication — as is
4. any written document. Use business standards, topics and professional verbiage.
4. Write concisely. If you have more than a few lines to communicate, call, request a conference or meeting. You need to be face-to-face. Also keep in mind that these days many recipients are reading off of a mobile device.
5. Do not send multiple e-mails regarding an issue. If there have been two, or a maximum of three e-mails, regarding an issue and it is still not clarified, pick up the phone.
6. Read the complete string of e-mails before responding. (The answers to your questions may already be there.) On the flip-side, don't expect the recipient of your e-mail to read an e-mail trail. Provide a synopsis of the situation or, at minimum, highlight the area they should review.
7. Use the blind carbon copy (Bcc) field for addressing when the list of recipi-

1/3 PG. SQUARE AD:
INTEGRATE SS

ents is lengthy. By using this field, the names and addresses of all recipients won't appear in the received e-mail. With a lengthy recipient list, the reader might not scroll through it to get to the message. Also, sometimes it is best not to identify the recipients to each other.

8. Linda Campbell, CAE, president of Linda Campbell, LTD, says one of her first lessons in association management was: "When in doubt, don't. Nowhere is that more valid than in responding to e-mails, particularly those which have raised your blood pressure."
9. When writing or responding to an e-mail, always assume that your e-mail may be forwarded to others. Always keep it professional.
10. Limit the bells and whistles and the editorial comments. Victoria Ceh, executive director of the International Society of Hair Restoration Surgery, says, "A fancy background, colorful border or huge purple font distracts from the message and looks juvenile. My first impression is that the person just discovered how to change their settings and was having fun choosing their style. I have also seen interesting closings. One physician I work with has an automatic signature in his business and personal e-mails that includes the closing, 'I Serve, Because He Lives.' I believe he had a life-changing event that brought him close to God, but I question if this is a proper representation of his company."



Is Web Content Really that Different? YES!

Another form of electronic communication, and equally important in fostering a positive perception to others, is Web writing and should also be a focus for your organization.

With a printed document, the user is focused on the entire set of information. Many studies show that users do not *read* on the Web; instead they scan the pages, trying to pick out a few sentences or even parts of sentences to get the information they want.

On the Web, split each document into multiple hyperlinked pages since users are not willing to read long pages. Additionally, users can enter a site at any page and move between pages as they choose, so make every page independent and explain its topic without

assumptions about the previously viewed pages.

Effective Writing for the Web

- **Font.** Use Arial or Verdana, 10 or 12 point. These are the most readable fonts on the Web.
- **Three-Click Rule.** Anything your constituent wants should be no more than three clicks away. Make sure the user does not get frustrated navigating your Web site.
- **Use conventional guidelines for good writing.** This includes carefully organizing the information, using words and categories that make sense to the audience, using topic sentences, limiting each paragraph to one main idea and providing the right amount of information.
- **Credibility is important.** Exactly who the publisher of a particular Web site is — and who the sources of information in the site are — may be unclear to users. Users may have linked directly into the middle of your site. Make sure they know they are on *your* organization's Web site at all times so they'll know the content comes from a credible source.
- **Scannable Text.** While scanning text, users normally read only the first sentence of each paragraph to save time. To enhance scanning, use headings, large type, bold text, highlighted text, bulleted lists, graphics, captions, topic sentences and tables of contents. Put the important information at the top of the page so the user does not have to scroll through a lot of text to find it.
- **Clear, Concise Text.** Users read about 25 percent more slowly on screen than on paper. It is important that the content is concise and easy-to-read. It is also important that the user can easily print the information. Consistent with users' desire to get information quickly is their preference for short text. Try to fit the content onto one screen and use simple sentence structures. ■

When writing or **responding** to an e-mail, always assume that your e-mail may be **forwarded** to others. Always keep it **professional**.

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