

8 tips for more effective e-mails

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Most business people receive dozens, even hundreds, of e-mails each day. Without question, e-mail is now the primary means of communication in the professional world. That's why it's very important to create messages that effectively communicate your point while presenting a professional image. Here are eight helpful tips for writing e-mails that achieve both goals.

1. Set clear, concrete deadlines. If you're sending a task or a request for more information, don't just say, "Hope to hear from you soon." Make it clear by what time or date you need a response and write the deadline clearly, for instance: "Please respond by next Thursday, January 15th."

2. Use proper spelling and grammar. Poorly spelled or grammatically incorrect e-mails make you appear unprofessional and reduce the effectiveness of your communication. Always double check your e-mails before sending them, making use of spelling and grammar check tools.

3. Think (and read) before you write. In our haste to respond to all our e-mails in a timely fashion, many of us neglect to fully read the mail we're answering and thus may overlook crucial bits of information. This can lead to even more e-mails in order to clarify what was overlooked or misunderstood. So before you send a response, make sure you've completely read and understood the original e-mail; if not, ask for a clarification to avoid further confusion.

4. Be polite. E-mail is a convenient way to communicate, but convenience shouldn't be an excuse for overlooking simple etiquette. When you're communicating with clients or superiors, don't overlook basic courtesies. Address the recipient with a greeting like "Hello" or "Dear," and be sure to include a closing salutation like "Regards."

5. Use subject lines effectively. Your subject line should be a concise synopsis of the content of your e-mail. The recipient should immediately know at a glance what the e-mail contains or what the request is – for example, "Follow-up from meeting next Friday, January 16th."

6. Limit the use of the To:, Cc:, and Bcc: fields. Most of us already have a problem with inbox overflow. Help cut down on unnecessary e-mails by limiting the number of people on your e-mail distribution. It's tempting, especially when working on a group project, to include every member of the team on every e-mail. A better approach is to make sure everyone you "cc" is someone who needs to review or respond to the mail.

7. Keep it brief. Long, rambling e-mails are time-consuming to write and to read. Keep it concise, including only the most important details, and be sure to get straight to the point. If an in-depth discussion is needed, schedule a phone call rather than trading lengthy e-mails. It's usually more efficient.

8. Use the journalistic 'inverted pyramid' format. Busy people want to get the point quickly. To make sure your critical information or request isn't lost or overlooked in a sea of less-important details, use a journalistic technique known as the "inverted pyramid". In this format, the most important information (who, what, where, when, why and how) is contained at the beginning of your e-mail and the least important information at the end.

When you make the effort to write the best e-mails possible, you improve your professional image as well as your efficiency on the job. Better communication always creates better results.