

By Calvin Sun

Few communications tools give you as much exposure as e-mail. Unfortunately, mistakes in your e-mail will receive that same exposure as well. Depending on who sees your e-mail, your job, reputation, or career could suffer. Fortunately, avoiding these mistakes is easy. Here are 10 e-mail habits that annoy me (and maybe you as well) and what you can do differently.

1 Vague or nonexistent subject line

Professor Woodward, who taught me contracts last year at Temple University Beasley School of Law, gave me one of the most useful pieces of advice I have ever received. "When arguing a case," he often said, "make it easy for the judge to rule in your favor."

Apply that same principle to e-mail. That is, make it easy for recipients to know what your message is about. If you're like most people, you have an in-basket that summarizes your incoming messages, probably by date, sender, and subject. Don't you love it when you can get the information you need simply from the subject line? The sender has made it easy for you and has saved you time.

On the other hand, how often have you received an e-mail without a subject or one that's labeled, for example, "Phone number you requested." Why couldn't the sender have said, right in the subject line, "The phone number is xxx-xxx-xxxx"?

When sending an e-mail that concerns a particular person, give details in the subject line, along with the name. For example, if Joe Brown has been promoted, make your subject line "Joe Brown has been promoted." Do not use only the name as the subject. If you send out an e-mail with just the subject "Joe Brown," recipients may mistakenly believe that Mr. Brown has passed on.

In the event you do need to transmit such sad news, be explicit. For example, say "Joe Brown RIP" or "Passing of Joe Brown" or "Joe Brown [year of birth] – [year of death]."

2 Changing the topic without changing the subject

Have you ever read an advertisement for an item that's on sale, then gone to the store only to discover that that item is sold out? By law, the store has to give you a rain check, because of abuses in the past. In the old days, the store would simply try to sell you something else instead, a practice known as "bait and switch."

E-mail users employ bait and switch all too often, usually out of laziness. For example, you send a note to a co-worker about subject 1. That co-worker later needs to send a note to you on subject 2. However, instead of creating a new note and labeling it "subject 2," he or she simply replies to you, discusses subject 2, but keeps the subject line as "subject 1." Annoying, isn't it? When you send e-mail, make sure the subject line matches the actual subject. If you're going to send a note via a reply, change the subject line to match the actual subject.

A few months ago, during a period of really cold weather, a neighbor sent an e-mail to all the residents of our development regarding a minor matter, such as a neighborhood telephone directory, and titled it "neighborhood directory." A half hour later, I received a reply-to-all message from another neighbor with the subject "Re: neighborhood directory." When I accidentally clicked on that message, I read that the sender's heater had broken and that he was asking to borrow blankets and kerosene heaters. He did get what he needed and did later get his heater fixed. However, had he given his note a better subject heading, he might have had a faster response.

3 Including multiple subjects in one note

Covering multiple topics in one note involves less sending and hence less e-mail traffic and volume. However, your recipient might overlook one or more of those topics. It's better to keep to one topic per message.

4 Sending before thinking

When you were small, your mother probably told you to count to three before responding to someone (mine told me to count to 10). Why did she say that? She knew that answering before thinking can lead to problems.

Make sure you really mean to say what you've written. People can interpret your words differently from what you meant. A statement made in jest to someone via e-mail may have a greater chance of being misinterpreted than one made in person. Also, be careful about reacting and replying too quickly to an e-mail that upsets you. As Proverbs 12:16 says, "A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult."

I'll talk more about it in a future article, but legal implications offer another reason to think before sending. E-mail can be subject to "discovery" by attorneys for a party that might be suing your employer. That is, the things you write in your e-mail could end up in the hands of those attorneys and could be used as evidence against your company in a trial. So before you send an e-mail, imagine that you're on a witness stand having to explain it.

5 Inadvertent replying to all

Before hitting Reply To All, make sure you really need to do so. Does everyone need to see your response? Does your response benefit everyone else? Or are you sending merely a private response or addressing a personal issue with the sender? In these situations, it's better just to do a simple Reply. Otherwise, your private disagreement becomes public (and embarrassing) knowledge.

Be aware that if you receive a message because you're part of certain message groups (e.g., a Yahoo group), your reply might go to everyone in the group even if you just hit Reply.

6 Omitting the context of a reply

As long as it's not overdone, including the text of the original message in your reply can help the original sender understand your response. If all you send back, however, is a "Yes" or "That's right," it may be difficult for the sender to understand your answer. For that reason, it's best to indicate the context of your answer by including the original question.

7 Shooting the messenger

Though the practice of shooting the messenger occurs more on message boards than in e-mail, it still deserves mention. Here's what I mean by *shooting the messenger*:

- ◆ Person A posts a message or sends an e-mail that quotes person B
- ◆ Person C
 - Receives the message
 - Takes extreme exception to the quotation by person B
 - In responding to A, attacks A rather than B

If you're person C (the recipient), make sure you make the proper distinction when you reply. Just because A posted the comment by B doesn't mean that A agrees with B. When you reply, address your comments to A. When talking about B, mention B explicitly and do so in the third (rather than the second) person.

Right:

To: A

From: C

Thanks for that note. Yes, I think B is really wrong on that statement.

Wrong:

To: A

From: C

What a ridiculous statement. It's totally wrong.

8 Misaddressed recipients

A woman and former classmate told me about an incident involving her law school days and then-boyfriend. During a summer job between two of her years in school, she met another young man. One day she wrote a letter to a girlfriend, talking about this new boyfriend. She also wrote a letter to her old boyfriend. You guessed it: A few days later, the girlfriend called and said, "You know, you sent me a letter addressed to Wayne [the old boyfriend]."

Be careful when addressing e-mail, particularly if your software has a "predictive fill-in" feature (as Outlook Express does). As you're typing in a recipient name, the software will complete the entry for you. If it's wrong, and you hit Send without noticing, you will have misaddressed your note. I have, in my address book, an entry for Joy Fellowship. It's a church youth group with whom I have been involved as a leader and to which my daughters belong. I also have an entry for their piano teacher, Joy Kiszely. When I address a note to her, I have to be careful. Because of alphabetization, Joy Fellowship appears before Joy Kiszely does. I haven't erred yet, but it's a real possibility.

9 Displaying addresses of recipients who are strangers to each other

Were you ever the recipient of an e-mail that had a gazillion other recipients as well? The message header, which had all of those recipient addresses, probably took up half your screen. Besides annoying you, the sender might have compromised your privacy by revealing your e-mail address to all the other recipients.

Don't make the same mistake. If you're POSITIVE that each of your recipients already knows (or could find out anyway) the address of every other recipient (e.g., they're all in your company), and if the number of recipients is fairly small, go ahead and list them. Otherwise, address the note to yourself and put the recipient addresses in your blind carbon copy (bcc) field. Your recipients will not see who received your note, thus saving space and protecting the privacy of each recipient.

10 Replying vs. forwarding

Didn't you hate it when you were young and your parents talked about you to their friends while you were present? They'd refer to you in the third person, as if you weren't even there.

I thought about that situation last week after talking to a prospective client with whom I had spoken a few months earlier. I sent him an e-mail with links to my TechRepublic articles and blogs. Later that day, I received a reply from him. However, when I opened it, here's what I read:

John,

Despite his claim, I don't remember talking with Calvin before. It may have happened but wasn't memorable. When you have time, could you read his article and let me know if it is worth doing anything else with it? Thanks.

Of course, the prospective client meant to *forward* my note to John (presumably a subordinate). Instead, he hit Reply, sending his note right back to me, not to his subordinate. Be careful that you don't do the same thing. If you're writing about person B but sending the note to person C, make sure you do forward (or send) your note to C and that you don't inadvertently reply to B.

By the way, after getting this note, I replied back to the person, asking whether the note had been meant for someone else and offering to figure out who "John" was and to send him the note directly. The person replied again, apologizing and admitting that he was poor at multi-tasking.



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