Guidelines For Effective Email Communication

Email is the most popular Internet application. Over 700 million email boxes exist worldwide. 84 per cent of Internet users use email.

A recent report estimated that over 9 trillion emails were sent worldwide last year! Spam messages are jamming in-boxes across the globe and the average office worker now gets between 60-200 messages a day.

So, with that background, it makes sense that you need to use email effectively, not only to save you time but also to ensure that your messages get read by your audience correctly.

The lack of visual, auditory or physical cues can lead to miscommunication, and as people perceive email as being more like speech than writing there is a greater potential for communication breakdown.

Email is also seen as not being very suitable for conveying very complex information or information that could be misinterpreted.

Meaning can be lost when emails are:
Too brief or abbreviated
Too longwinded
Miscommunication can happen when the sender makes incorrect or inappropriate assumptions, i.e. when the email refers to previous email history that has not been forwarded on or to a conversation that has not directly been referred to.

The speed and ease with which email enables people to communicate, the scale on which we can communicate, and the material that email communications are capable of containing, all create a unique set of challenges, issues, and questions. Some of these are simply old problems in new clothing, and the old rules still apply. Others are brand-new beasts, requiring a new set of guidelines to keep them reined in.

The following are hints on what to do and what not to do when using e-mail.

Be concise
E-mail is meant to be one of the quickest ways to communicate. It is much more informal than a letter or even phone call. Some people receive hundreds of e-mails a day, so keep e-mail short and to the point. But be aware -rushed messages can lead to bad grammar and miscommunication.
* Consider using bulleted points to clearly express your thoughts. You'll save time and your reader will appreciate it. Investing extra time while authoring an email pays big dividends by giving your reader a clear understanding of your message.
Remember, if your email is written with the purpose to educate, inform, or persuade, then making sure to get your point across is even more critical.

Useful Subject Lines
Since many email messages go back and forth several times over the course of many weeks, it's important to accurately describe what the reader will find inside.
A subject line that pertains clearly to the email body will help people mentally shift to the proper context before they read your message. The subject line should be brief, does not need to be a complete sentence, and should give a clue to the contents of the message.

Use Threads
Threads are a series of responses to an original message. When responding to a message, pursue the thread by replying to the messages instead of starting an entirely new message. Keeping the thread information together makes it easier for the participants to follow the chain of information that has been exchanged. This is most appreciated when responding to a newsgroup or a list serve, which may have multiple discussions occurring simultaneously.

Practice the 24-hour rule when you're upset
It's never a good idea to send an email when you're angry. We've all been guilty of this. In the heat of the moment we type up a literary bombast. If you compose an email in anger, wait a predetermined period of time before sending it. If your emotions are legit, then your issue will still be there tomorrow. But in 95% of the cases, you'll be glad you waited and toned things down after you've gain the perspective that can only come with some additional time.

Realize that once your message is sent, there's no getting it back
Email communication in the workplace has been around about 10 years. Before the '90s, if you composed a letter later deemed too harsh or in poor taste, there were more steps involved before the message was sent. Today, the stakes are much higher. People can literally ruin their career with a single 60-second lapse in judgment, by sending the wrong message to someone. Email is also ridiculously easy to edit and forward. Keep in mind that a message sent to one person can eventually be viewed by many other unintended parties. Always double-check the recipient line before sending any email. Horror stories about messages accidentally copied to "ALL" are becoming routine.

Answer your email quickly
Recent surveys have shown that a large percentage of email messages either go unanswered or are not responded to timely. Take advantage of this inherent competitive edge you can get. What do you think when someone doesn't respond to your phone messages? It's no different with email.

Attachments
If you are planning to send the attachment, make sure that it is the correct one that corresponds to the email message that you are sending. Wrong attachment leads to wrong understanding. Use proper naming conventions and file extensions to identify your documents. Within your e-mail messages, clearly specify that there is an attachment with its proper file name, application software version, content description and size of the attached file so the recipient can make an immediate judgment as to what will be required to view the file. A compression software could be used to compress your files to protect from damage-in-transit. Compression can make large files smaller to decrease the online time, but the more important benefit is the way it encloses the delicate artwork files inside a file type designed for proper transmittal.
The two most popular compression formats are "zip" and "sit."

Decide for good email software
It may seem like Microsoft has taken over the world, but there are still a few other fish in the sea. Whether you manage your email system yourself or let an ISP do it, you still want to pick the email client (the software that lets you send and receive email messages) that works best for your company's needs. Products range from the multi-tasking Microsoft Outlook, to simple web-based programs that do little more than send and receive basic text messages. The email client you choose will largely depend upon how you plan to manage your email system. Microsoft Outlook offers the most comprehensive program with the most versatility for business if you're looking for integrated features. And many of these features come free in Outlook Express. But if you don't need all the fancy stuff and find the interface too busy, go with Eudora or Netscape. And for more content driven, all-in-one communications packages, consider Netscape and AOL.

Pick the right ISP (Internet Service provider)
Choosing the right ISP is a matter of finding the best balance between your budget, your experience, how fast your connection must be, and what features really make a difference. When selecting a service provider, consider the way you will be using the Internet in your business. Many people use nationwide ISPs such as AOL, Earthlink, or MSN simply because they're well known. Many local ISPs know their customers well, and have a good handle on what they need. This is not to say that there is anything inherently wrong with using a nationwide ISP, but don't rule local ISPs out simply because they're smaller.
ISPs are like restaurants - those with bad reputations survive, but by listening to what other people say, you can avoid them.
Using anything less than a full-service ISP could cause frustration, especially with attachments of large files. You should be on the lookout for reliability, good support, quality of service, price, speed and performance of that ISP.