

Email Etiquette - Ten Rules for Effective Business Email

by Soren Eilertsen, Ph.D.

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Introduction

Email is simultaneously a great efficiency tool and the lethal weapon of the information age. Most of us spend an enormous amount of time with email. Much of this time is spent sorting spam from legitimate email but more notably, we spend too much time trying to interpret legitimate email.

Before email, it was difficult to get anyone in the office to write a memo – the typewriter and the written word were too intimidating - but now email has forced everyone to take on the keyboard and the result is disastrous. I frequently receive emails where I have trouble understanding the message and waste my time trying to dissect the email in order to comprehend it.

This is especially troublesome because we all receive so many emails where we are one of many recipients. Scrutinizing the email to understand whether the information concerns you or requires action on your part can take valuable time. Moreover, remember, you are working hard because the sender was either too lazy to double check the email for readability before sending it or was in need of a refresher course in business writing 101.

Here are my 10 rules for effective business email correspondence:

#1 State your purpose or request up front

Allow the reader to immediately understand what this communication is about and what is requested. This gives the reader the ability to decide whether to continue reading and also to understand what is being asked.

#2 Meaningful subject line

Let the subject line be pertinent. You may want to specify in a shortened form, both the purpose and the request. Don't just write "Follow-up" or "Meeting invitation"; make the meaning clear by saying "Follow-up to your proposal – Let's meet" or "ABC Project meeting scheduled for March 3rd at 10:30AM in the Board Room"

#3 Organize information

Remember to organize your information so there is a clear distinction between recommendations, issue description, and background information.

#4 Keep It Short and Simple (KISS)

Longer communication is typically better organized in other document formats rather than email; consequently email communication should be short and to the point. Be direct in your communication. Sometimes a single "yes" or "no" is better than a full page illumination. Be clear as to why you are writing the email: What do you need or require from the receiver? What is your conclusion?

#5 No technical mumbo jumbo

For the technical people in the audience: Put yourself in the business users' position and use normal business language when you communicate. Don't communicate to business users in programming language or use technical terms exclusive to your profession. Business users don't understand the language and they don't care to!

#6 Own your communication through follow-up

Just because you sent an email does not mean that the receiver(s) read or understood it. As soon as your email is more than a few lines long or includes bulleted paragraphs, chances are that the reader misses one or more points. The originator must take responsibility for the communication and comprehension on the part of the receiver. Follow-up with a phone call or a meeting – and state this in your email message.

#7 Use CC or BCC sparingly

Remember that everyone that receives your email will have to consider whether to read it. We all receive hundreds of emails everyday and none of us read it all. Therefore, the more people you involve in your email, the more polished and to the point, your email should be. I rarely use the blind carbon copy – BCC feature – because receivers will frequently go ahead and respond to the entire group, which may cause confusion or worse.

#8 Don't hit the "REPLY ALL" button

The "Reply All" button is dangerous when replying to a meeting request with numerous invitees or an email addressed to lots of people. The other 300 people on the CC list do rarely need to know that you are going to be at the meeting! Although I find email threads with a number of people in the CC list amusing, it quickly gets tiring when I receive 30 emails from people responding to the same communication – that I didn't initiate!

#9 Contact information in all emails

I believe that you should include your contact information in all email communication. That way the receiver is able to call you without having to look up your phone number – its right there. It also acts as a stamp of authenticity in this age of Spam and identity theft. Just one warning, don't include it multiple times in the same email thread. If it's already in the email thread then don't include it again.

#10 Practice kindness

And finally, keep in mind that your emails never leave cyberspace. They may stay around longer than you. NEVER put an emotionally charged response or comment in an email! Chances are that you will regret it. Deal with emotionally charged communication in person. If you feel emotionally charged when writing an email, then don't send it before you have recovered and read it again. Most often, you will find that it should not be sent as is. Anger in emails tends to look stupid the day after. Same with humor! Somehow most spoken humor does not translate well into written communication. Be kind – it earns you the right to take up space on the planet.

About the Author

As President of Kollner Group, Soren Eilertsen has helped numerous clients in different industries activate and align leadership teams around business results and innovation. Clients praise him for his ability to guide business leaders and teams to insights and new levels of success.

Soren works as a business consultant, educator and leadership coach specializing in strategy and organization development. He helps clients build effective leadership teams, create winning strategies, and obtain success with change initiatives.

Since establishing Kollner Group in 1999, Soren has helped shape the strategic directions and create results for numerous businesses and non-profits in both Europe and the United States. He has worked on world-class endeavors and been fortunate to engage with leaders in great organizations such as AECOM Design, American Suzuki, McKesson, Mission Critical Technologies, MK Sound, Motown Museum Project, Nordisk Film Biografer, Pacific Coast Producers, Pacific Theatres, Polar Air Cargo, Rand, System Simulations, UC Health System and Vulcan (Paul Allen).

Combining his education as a psychologist with years in corporate executive roles, Soren takes a unique integral approach that enables him to examine a business from the perspective of its internal leadership, systems, and culture as well as from the market-, business value-, and external customer perspectives.

Visit www.kollnergroupp.com to find out more about Soren Eilertsen and the Kollner Group.

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