

Top 10 Tips for Tackling Your Email Inbox

By Dianna Booher

One manager told me, “We don’t write much anymore. We do most of our business by email. We put our marketing information, policies, and procedures on the Intranet.”

I asked him, “But what do people read on the web and in their email?” Words! More, not fewer, people write. And more people write more. And in today’s ecommerce, written communication makes the competitive difference. Customers, clients, and prospective partners often check your website before they even phone or fax you. If your words don’t communicate what they need to know or build your credibility, you’ll never get a chance to connect with them by phone or in person.

Here are a few tips to make writing easier and faster with better results:

1. **Strive For a Style Somewhere Between Stuffed-Shirt Writing and T-Shirt Writing**

Just as the business casual dress code has some people stumped, so has the business casual writing style. Some writers confuse the screen for a t-shirt slogan.

2. **Avoid Knee-Jerk Responses**

E-mail’s greatest benefit can also be its greatest drawback: speed. We open. We read. We reply. Then we think—or don’t, as the case may be.

3. **If You Don’t Have Something to Say, Don’t Say It**

On the street, when someone you know speaks to you, etiquette requires that you return the greeting. Not so with e-mail.

4. **Check It, But Don’t Be Chained To It**

Instead of being constantly distracted, let the e-mails pile up and check them only once or twice a day.

5. **Use The “So What?” Prompt To Turn Information into Communication**

Imagine your reader asking, “So what?” Then add the answer: Draw conclusions. State the action you want.

6. **Avoid Stream-Of-Consciousness Rambling**

Just as the penny is the basis for our monetary system, the sentence is our basic unit of thought. If your e-mail wasn’t all that interesting to read the first time, imagine forcing people to slog through it a second time to catch your meaning.

7. Guard Against A Trigger-Happy ‘Send’ Finger

As a safety measure, don’t enter the recipient’s e-mail address until you have the e-mail ready to go—with all attachments. Then if your trigger finger goes off, your e-mail is still safely in your hands.

8. Make Sure “Anytime, Anywhere” Doesn’t Mean “No Time, Nowhere”

Many organizations advertise that they’re available anytime anywhere. But the reality is that that expectation disappoints all too often. Email goes unanswered for days and weeks.

9. Be Wary of Humor or Sarcasm

Comedy writers earn big bucks. Either make sure your humor works or don’t try it.

10. Understand Your Liability for Personal E-Mails on Company Systems

Inexpensive software packages can scan up to 50,000 e-mails an hour for objectionable words (unfair, performance review, copyright, breast, resume, angry) and forward those messages to a designated person. Consider that your e-mail may be retrieved for any number of things that keep people awake at night.

What’s the pay-off when people and organizations write things right? Increased profits and productivity.

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511 words

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For more on business writing, see E-Writing: 21st-Century Tools for Effective Communication (Simon & Schuster/Pocket Books) by Dianna Booher.