



Autistic Services, Inc.

Teq-Tips

Below is a nice little article I found regarding some email bad habits. It was written by Calvin Sun of the Web Site Techrepublic, a techie site I frequent. I thought it would make a good monthly "Teq-Tips." I have actually had some people come to me with these very same complaints that others in our company do, like leaving the subject line blank. (I hate that!)

I hope these are helpful to you.

Calvin Sun, 6/20/07

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 five e-mail habits that annoy me (and maybe you as well), and what you can do differently. I'll share another five in my next article.

#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 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.

Do you recognize yourself in any of these mistakes? The good news is that once you recognize these issues, it's easy to address them.