

The Etiquette of E-Mail

You can find many articles on e-mail etiquette but I want to share a few thoughts that rarely get covered. As a small-business owner, one of your most valuable tools is e-mail, and your most valued marketing resource is a client's e-mail address. Whether you are sending an individualised communication (e.g. an answer to a question) or a mass mailing, you don't want to waste the client's time or patience. In the latter case, a mass mailing, you especially don't want the reader to click on the unsubscribe link!

The obvious advice, often quoted, is to keep your message short and focussed. You'll find lots of suggestions for this, but my favourite is to put your message right in the subject line. Not all of the message, of course, but enough to let the recipient see what the mail is about. This can solve the problem of whether to continue a "conversation" or assume it's OK. You said you're free all day Friday. She said 3pm Friday would be fine. Do you leave it at that and assume a meeting for 3pm Friday? I'd reply with a subject line: "Meeting confirmed: Friday Jan 12, 3pm, your office" and the message "See you then", rather than leave it to chance. It takes moments, and the client will appreciate the clarity. However, when you go that route, don't add another question inside the e-mail. The subject should cover the entire content.

Another way to save time is to maintain the content trail of the conversation. As long as it's relevant, don't delete the conversation leading up to now. If the content changes, then change the subject line and consider deleting the now-irrelevant content. You might also choose to reply in two parts if there are now two divergent issues. Keep track of who needs to be copied as well. Not everyone is still interested!

Two major faux pas can really upset people:

- Having a template copy of an e-mail which you intend to individually customise and send to several people, but you forget to change the name, so David's letter says "Dear George"
- Sending a mass mailing and putting everyone's e-mail address on the cc: line. While this is fine if the recipients all know each other, if the only thing they have in common is that they are all your clients, they will not appreciate your giving their e-mail address to everyone else!

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He is semi-retired but accepts contracts to help finance his expensive hobbies. David retired from a 33-year career in corporate IT and now specialises in developing database applications for Windows platforms, web-sites, and generally in improving business processes by simplifying, clarifying and beautifying all kinds of business documents.

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You can learn more about the work he does at www.creekwood.ca.

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So put yourself in the clients' place every time you communicate with them, and ask yourself: what is the message I want to send? Is this e-mail conveying that message quickly and clearly? Is there an unwanted message I am also sending? Is the attachment I promised really attached? These are important when you're sending a simple response to a query, and critical if you are sending the message to every one of your clients. And to those of you used to sending mail to colleagues in a Corporate e-mail system, remember in the outside (Internet) world, there is no retract function—once you press "Send", you can't get it back!