SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

The Stepping Stone

November 2012 – Issue 48

Twelve Questions that Will Change
the Way You Email

By Malory Fischer

As a professional, you're comfortable with the everyday etiquette expected at your office. You greet your colleagues amiably, you respond to phone calls promptly, you respect other people's time constraints, and you wouldn't dream of making a sloppy appearance.

But what about your email? How well do you mind your manners when you communicate electronically?

In the current business environment, where email is the go-to method of communication, your written messages are an important extension of your professional persona. So what kind of impression does your email make?

Here's a test of your email etiquette that will help you polish your professional image.

Mark each item as True or False.

1. _____ Because email is intended to be a quick, informal way of communicating, the traditional rules of grammar, spelling and punctuation don't apply.

2. _____ Subject headings are optional.

3. _____ When email threads become lengthy, don't delete them, but do periodically summarize them in a few lines before providing additional input. Label the summary section of the email with a subheading such as Summary.

4. _____ Generally limit your To list to the person(s) from whom you expect a response.

5. _____ Double-check the name(s) in the To list; make sure your message is going to the intended recipient(s).

6. _____ There's no such thing as too much information. Include the widest possible circle of recipients on your Cc lists, including all possible stakeholders.

7. _____ When an email is distributed to a number of colleagues, your reply should always be sent as a Reply to All.

8. _____ Use Bcc to confidentially keep the recipient's manager (or your own manager) abreast of a sensitive situation.

9. _____ Language and culture differences are of little concern when composing business email.

Malory Fischer, president of Communication Concepts Training, Inc., leads workshops to increase efficiency and innovation through clear and collaborative communication. She can be reached at *malory@ cctraining.com* or at 732.469.1387.

2. **FALSE.** The subject heading should clearly predict the content of the message. For the reader, a descriptive subject heading is useful for prioritizing and filing. For the writer, the subject heading is an opportunity to bottom-line the message: state the topic and key information about the topic. For example, use Sales Meeting Postponed instead of Sales Meeting. If your email asks for information or warrants a quick response, include a subject line such as Request Updated ABC Data or Consumer Complaint: Pls Respond.

3. **TRUE.** Especially if you're asking for input from someone on your Cc list, make it easy to respond by including a succinct summary of the discussion. Also, if the conversation moves to a new topic, start a new chain with an adjusted subject heading.

4. **TRUE.** Use your To list to clarify who the active players are.

5. **TRUE.** Whether by human error or automatic insertion, your email can end up in the inbox of unintended recipients. This mistake may not irrevocably damage your career because we know better than to send highly sensitive, private, or embarrassing messages through the business email system. (We should all have learned from publicized horror stories about career-killing emails containing improprieties or worse.) However, if a time-sensitive email doesn't reach your intended recipient, that could derail your timeline or otherwise negatively impact outcomes.

6. **FALSE.** Include on your Cc list the smallest number of stakeholders that makes sense. Writers sometimes make the mistake of including parties who lack sufficient interest in the topic or who should not be involved in the discussion at this particular stage. If you're using email to resolve issues or make decisions within a small team, generally exclude outside stakeholders until you have something definite to report.

7. **FALSE.** Use Reply to All only when it's important for people other than the sender to know your

10. _____ Using the high priority notation assures you of a quick response.

11. _____ Your signature file should contain contact information as well as personal touches such as a favorite quote or symbol.

12. _____ Email communication is suitable for all business situations.

CHECK YOUR ANSWERS

1. **FALSE**. Although email should be quick and informal, it should not be poorly written. Ignoring the conventions of grammar, spelling, punctuation and capitalization is sloppy and reflects poorly on you and your organization. Informality in email means short sentences (no longer than two typed lines), short paragraphs, and frequent bullet lists. You can use "I" and contractions, but never use all capitals (because it looks as if you're yelling) or all lowercase letters (because you don't have poetic license).

answer. For a meeting announcement, a simple Reply will usually do. A concluding "thank you" or a nicety such as "my pleasure" doesn't require a Cc to your boss or others.

8. FALSE. Generally, using Bcc can be risky since secrecy can sometimes backfire. However, this might be a useful option for broadcast messages where all 500 employees are receiving the same notice.

9. FALSE. Always write with audience awareness. When writing for a global audience, redouble your efforts to write clearly; use simple sentence constructions, bullet lists and a minimum of idioms. Keep in mind, too, that a greeting like "Good morning" may be inappropriate because of time differences. Also, recipients from some cultures will expect email to include formalities such as a friendly salutation (Dear, Hi, or Hello), a title (Mr., Ms., Dr., or equivalent), and a closing (Regards, Best regards, Sincerely). Do your homework and find out what's polite wherever you do business.

10. FALSE. The high priority flag may alert your recipient to your desire for a quick reply, but it doesn't guarantee compliance. Remember that email allows for rapid delivery of your message, but not necessarily a rapid reply. If you use the high priority signal, do so sparingly; you don't want a reputation for "crying wolf." Within your message, you can ask politely for a quick answer, but sometimes a phone call is just a smarter choice. In terms of your own email responses, aim to reply by end-of-business or at least within 24 hours. If you can't provide a full answer within that time frame, send a quick note that you'll get back within a couple of days.

11. FALSE. Leave out the quirky personal touches. That goes for brightly colored print and distinctive fonts, too. Use emoticons and texting abbreviations only when you know your readers well and you're sure they'll understand the meaning. Even then, use such informal tools sparingly. Save them for your personal email because they're … personal.

FALSE. Since email is more permanent and more apt to be misunderstood than spoken communication, some situations warrant a phone call, a meeting or an informal conversation. Don't write when you're feeling angry or emotional. Don't continue writing when you've already tried twice (unsuccessfully) to clear up some confusion through email. In fact, try not to over-rely on email; it's always convenient but it's not always the best method for achieving your ends or for building strong business relationships. ●

Use emoticons and texting abbreviations *sparingly* and only when you know your readers well and you're sure they'll understand the meaning.