



Five ways to increase the effectiveness of every email you send.

By Ben Reed and John Reed

Email isn't as effective as you thought. Of all the emails sent, up to half of them fail to accomplish their purpose. BusinessWeek reports that "as few as 50% of users grasp the tone or intent of an email."* At best, all these misunderstood emails waste time and sacrifice productivity. At worst, they reflect poorly on you and your organization, sometimes jeopardizing important client relationships.

The good news is that it doesn't take a lot of work to make your emails more effective. Successful emails do three things: get attention, get understood, and get a response. You don't have to be an expert writer to achieve such results. You just have to remember a few simple tips. Five, in fact.

1. Make it scannable

Most of your readers aren't really readers at all; they're skimmers and scanners. They're in a hurry, looking for the main message in your email so they can quickly respond and move on. Many are also doing or thinking about other things while looking over your email. To get their attention, make your message scannable.

Start by telling your readers exactly what your email is about in the subject line, and get to your key points quickly. Don't bury them in long paragraphs of complicated text. Remember that it's easier to scan lists than paragraphs – so think about using bullet points and numbered lists. If you have a lot to say, divide it into short paragraphs with subheads.

2. Tune the tone

Some emails read like messages to Facebook friends – complete with texting shortcuts (lol, btw, jk, ttyl), smiley faces, and missing capitalization and punctuation. This casual tone may seem friendly to the writer, but it sends the wrong message to customers, managers, colleagues, and business partners.

At the other end of the spectrum, many emails are just too formal and stuffy. In an effort to sound more professional, inexperienced writers come up with words and phrases that they would never use face to face ("As per your request, please find attached..."). Instead of impressing the reader, they come across as artificial and out of touch. The most effective emails are conversational, yet businesslike. They get straight to the point without being overly formal or overly familiar in their tone.

*Diane Brady (December 4, 2006). *!#@ The E-Mail. Can We Talk? *BusinessWeek*, from http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/06_49/b4012096.htm

3. Don't forget to ask

You're writing the email because you want action. You want someone to purchase your product, attend your meeting, send you that file, or come around to your point of view. To get action, you have to ask for it. Clearly. Directly. Ever wondered why ads almost always end with a call-to-action ("contact us today for more details")? Doesn't the reader already know that she can phone for more information? Perhaps. But advertisers know that they'll get a greater response if they ask for it specifically.

You can spend a lot of time carefully crafting your message and rationale, but unless you specifically tell the reader what to do next, you may not get the response you expected. Ask politely, but clearly. If you do, you'll get much better results with every email you send.

4. Trim the fat

Nobody wants to read a long email. If yours looks like it's going to take a while to digest, your reader might just "save it for later" and move on to something else. You'll be left wondering why you never heard back from him.

So, before you send out an email, look through it to see where you can cut, condense, and tighten up the message. Is there a shorter way to word that three-line sentence? Could you capture the essence of that two-paragraph discussion in a few simple bullet points? Can you eliminate that third point altogether? Even as professional writers, when we take a second look at the emails we've written, we almost always discover ways to shorten them.

5. Take 24

If you're sending a critical email to a very large or very important audience, give it the 24-hour test. Leave yourself enough time to write the email, wait a day, and then check through it again before sending it. Even after waiting 24 hours, it's a great idea to get someone else to look over the email as well. Why? When you're the one who wrote the document, you know what you meant to say and your brain tends to fill in the gaps as you read through it.

If your email can't wait for 24 hours, then at least take 24 minutes before sending it. Write your email. Take a break. Do something else for 24 minutes. Afterwards, go back and re-read your email. You'll spot odd wordings and unclear thoughts that you never even saw 24 minutes earlier.

Don't have 24 minutes? Then, give it the 24-second test. The point is to never send out an email that you haven't read through carefully more than once. It's one of the easiest ways to improve the effectiveness of every email you send.