

Don't you find this entire email phenomenon interesting? I certainly do. I was an early adopter of emails in the work place and it did not take me long to find out that I could get more done in a day. I could also by-pass the telephone tag dilemma. But, truthfully, over the years I have had some real communication blunders using email. When I first saw the "dude" commercial I wondered how many simple communications can be misinterpreted in an email. So, recently, I started to do some research and came up with some trivia about email. Here is some of that trivia:

- 183 billion emails are sent world-wide each day. That's about 2 million every second! •
  - 72% of those emails contain some level of spam or viruses. •
  - There are 1.2 billion email users worldwide. •

My real mission in my research was not about trivia, but to find some way to communicate to our customers the importance of what they say and *how* they say it in an email. I thought it would be an easy task, but my efforts ended in mixed results. Here are some of the things I found about communication in emails:

- I found tons and tons of information on email "rules," some of which I have summarized at the end of this article. Yikes! More rules.
- I found that some people are actually making a living by charging companies to teach their employees on how to write emails. Interesting; ...but, not surprising.
- I also found that there are multiple web sites that just simply plagiarize each other on their advice. That was a set-back.

But the one thing that seemed to elude any research was how to control the tone of the email. In other words, how do we control the inflection of our voice in an email as if we were speaking with the person? Suddenly, my research brought me to a dead end. I realized I was going to need to do this all by myself. I thought: 'Dude? What did you get yourself into?' Then my thoughts turned to a more serious realization: 'Whoa... *du-u-u-de*... This is going to take some time. ...and become a very long article.' Hmmm, that's where we are in this month's CEO corner – trying to deal with a serious problem in a short amount of space and give a lesson in sending emails from someone who has made more mistakes in an email than a first grader trying to pass college finals.

What I have done is whittle this article down to 2 personal email experiences to share and 1 of my own personal email rules. Here we go:

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First Example: I sent an email to a co-worker that asked this question: "Are you really going to talk to [Jane] about that?"

The receiver of the email interpreted this question as if I was belittling and badgering her. Oops! I had no intention of doing that. I was simply asking an informational question. But, if you verbalize the question with different voice inflections you can begin to see how the recipient added her own interpretation. The key word here is "really." It can be stated as a gentle question (as it was intended) all the way to an inflaming, intrusive remark.

Analysis: The recipient of my email read it this way: "Are you *really* going to talk to [Jane] about that?" Can you feel the difference? By the way, if you put a little zing into the word "that"

things could even get nastier. Here's how it would look: "Are you *really* going to talk to [Jane] about *that*?" When the reader is putting these types of inflections into your communication the email is bound to rattle some nerves. When sending emails we cannot control how a person reads the email, how they feel about your choice of words, and where they place their own inflection points as they read.

20/20 Hindsight: Maybe I should have been more sensitive and picked up the phone to ask my question.

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Second example: If you have a disagreement something that was said in an email, you should probably think twice before you attempt to resolve your feelings in an email. Take these types of words or phrases and try communicating them in an email the same way you would speak with a person: never, always, don't ever, my preference is..., I want. My experience was with a life-long friend and the whole story is too long to relate here, but I think I can summarize it to illustrate my point. Here is a condensed version of what became a lengthy email thread.

Friend: Hey Dave, I would like to organize a hiking trip for us to the Columbia River Gorge in two weeks. What do you think?

Response: No problem Mike, but my preference is Central Oregon. We are always going to the Gorge.

Friend: What do you mean always? We have not been on a trail there the last couple of times.

Response: What? We went there two weeks ago.

Friend: Geez! It seems impossible to agree on anything with you.

Analysis: Some lessons are learned the hard way! Needless to say we found ourselves in the midst of an argument that neither one of us intended. We were completely misinterpreting written language. He thought my initial response was rather short and contrary. I can now see his point, but I had no intention of sounding that way.

20/20 Hindsight: After his response to my response I should have just picked up the phone to engage in a real conversation. I'm confident that we would have both benefited from hearing one another's voice.

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Emails are about relationships. We are human beings sending each other communication bytes. Long before the internet evolved we were communicating with one another and making communication blunders! It's just life stuff and bound to happen! But, now that our lives include a new communication tool we just need to realize that our brains are writing down words that we think. But the receiver cannot see our face and is left to form their own conclusions about those words. The best thing we can do is perform a "pulse check" before we hit the "send" button.

I promised you one of my own personal email rules. In all of my research I could not find anyone who uses the 3 x 5 rule. Here it is:

- If your email thread is going beyond the third iteration; that is: 1.) Send, 2.) Respond, 3.) Respond to response...

- Or, if you are consuming more than 5 minutes composing or responding to an email...

You should probably slow down and ask yourself: Should I pick up the phone to continue this conversation (or walk over to their cubicle)? The answer is *probably* yes, but the key guideline here is to simply slow down and ask the question if email is the right form of communication. Relationships are important and being able to have a real conversation with someone works wonders in getting things done.

As a closing thought for you, at the end of my research I let my oblique sense of humor over come my good judgment. I remembered an article I had read last year about emails that had this observation: “Just think... if Alexander Graham Bell had invented the telephone *after* emails we would all be saying something like: Wow! You should use this telephone gadget. You can actually pick up a handset and talk to the person!”

Thanks everyone. Have a great month and remember that it’s our goal to deliver *history making* customer service directly to your desktop.

Here are some of those hints and rules I mentioned earlier:

✓ Remember that there's no such thing as a confidential e-mail. E-mail messages can be forwarded, and forwarded and forwarded. (Not to mention they can potentially be intercepted on the internet.)	✓ Don't send HUGE email attachments.
✓ Use a protected computer. The biggest cause of viruses is through email.	✓ Be careful if you use “Respond to All.” There may be someone you do not want to receive the email – or see content in the email thread.
✓ Use the “CC” and “BCC” fields wisely.	✓ Don't leave the subject line blank.
✓ Don't use business email for personal needs unless specifically authorized.	✓ Don't make sexual remarks.
✓ Keep messages brief and remain within a single topic.	✓ Reply in a timely manner even if you have to say it will be awhile before you could address the issue.
✓ Don't forward chain email letters.	✓ Only use the “high priority” mark when it really is a high priority.
✓ Make sure spell checker is turned on.	✓ Re-read your email before you hit send.
✓ Don't harass or discriminate in emails.	✓ Don't place massive numbers of email addresses in the “to” box. Some people appreciate their privacy. Use the “BCC” field instead.
✓ Understand your company's email policy.	✓ Think twice about your content before hitting the send button.