

WHAT DO YOUR BUSINESS EMAILS REVEAL ABOUT YOU?

I am a huge fan of email. In fact, if you do business with me the bulk of our communication will not be through the telephone, but via email. Email is quick. Email is convenient. Email takes less time than long-winded telephone conversations. Most importantly, email gives me an electronic record of my communications with clients, employees, partners, and vendors; which makes it easy for me to refresh my quickly-aging memory by easily referring back to our electronic conversations. As someone who receives and sends a couple hundred emails a day I have to tell you that I am constantly amazed at how poorly written and unprofessional most business emails are. I receive emails every day from fellow entrepreneurs that don't even contain full sentences. They are often rife with spelling and grammatical errors or typed in all capital letters, and sometimes, are virtually illiterate. One email I recently received from someone trying to sell me an expensive piece of equipment actually read, "tom-- what you think -- ready to buy?" First off, the name is "Tim" and secondly, what I think is: I will take my business elsewhere. Thank you, drive through. Why should you worry about how your emails are reviewed by their recipients? Because in business, you are constantly being judged by your customers, your employees, your investors, your partners, and your peers. If your emails give the impression that you don't put much thought into the composing of the message or that you're too busy to be bothered or that you are a total idiot who can't even use a spell checker, what do you think that says to the person on the other end? Email is quickly becoming the business correspondence medium of choice for the reasons I covered above, and if you don't take the time to learn how to effectively use email in a professional manner, it will come back to haunt you. There are rules that should be followed when sending business emails. The website Email Replies gives 32 tips for email etiquette. Culling from that list and adding a few of my own, here are Tim's Top 10 Rules of Email Etiquette that every entrepreneur, executive, and employee should follow. Make It Short And Sweet An email isn't a letter from camp, so don't drone on any longer than necessary. Keep in mind that reading an email on a computer screen is harder than reading printed communications, so keep it brief and to the point. Use Proper Spelling, Grammar & Punctuation This is not only important because improper spelling, grammar and punctuation give a bad impression of you and your company, it is also important to make sure your message is not misconstrued. Emails with improper punctuation (a comma and a period every now and then would be nice) are difficult to read and can sometimes even change the meaning of the message. And, if your email program has a spell checker do everyone a favor and use it. Include a Signature Block In Every Email A signature block in an email is the same as the signature block you would use to end a letter. You should include your name, title, company name and address, telephone number, email address and website address. Reply Quickly This is my number one pet peeve: people who take forever to answer email. Fast response is especially important if the email is from a customer or contains time-sensitive information. Customers send an email because they wish to receive a quick response. If they did not want a quick response they would send a letter or a fax or talk to your voicemail. Each email should be replied to within at least 24-hours, and preferably within the same working day. If the email can't be answered in full immediately you should at least send a reply saying that you have received their email and that you will get back to them ASAP. Read Every Email Before You Send It There's no better way to embarrass yourself than through a hastily sent email. A lot of people don't even bother to read an email before they send it out, as evidenced by the many spelling and grammatical errors most emails contain. Apart from this, reading your email through the eyes of the recipient will help you send a more effective message and avoid misunderstandings and inappropriate comments. Do Not Discuss Confidential Information Sending an email is like sending a postcard. Once it leaves your computer, the end user can do whatever they want with it, so if you do not want a documented record of your comments or the information shared with others, don't send it. Moreover, never make any libelous, sexist or racially discriminating comments in emails, even if they are meant to be a joke. There have been court cases where email correspondence was used as evidence. That's a road you do not want to go down. Don't Use ALL CAPS In email terms, IF YOU WRITE IN CAPITAL LETTERS IT SEEMS AS IF YOU ARE SHOUTING, so please tone it down. ALL CAPS are hard to read and can trigger an angry reply if the recipient mistakes the intention of your email. Emails should be written in standard sentence style. Turn the Caps Lock off and back away from the keyboard. Avoid Abbreviations and Emoticons In business emails, try not to use abbreviations such as BTW (by the way) and LOL (laugh out loud). The recipient might not be aware of the meanings of the abbreviations and in business emails these are generally not appropriate. The same goes for emoticons, such as the smiley :-) and his depressed pal :- (. If you are not sure whether your recipient knows what an acronym means, it is better not to use it. Don't Use Backgrounds or Silly Graphics I actually received an email from a fellow entrepreneur that had an animated smiley face waving a gloved hand in his signature block. If the email had come from Walt Disney I wouldn't have been shocked. Coming from a small technology company, I had to wince. Not much to smile about there. Remember That Email Is A Formal Business Communication You wouldn't send a formal letter to a customer that lacked a salutation, a well-thought out body of text, and a signature. You should use email in the same manner. A proper business email should be structured like a short letter. It should have a salutation, the body of the message, a sign off, and a signature. Next time we'll discuss email issues that should be a concern to larger companies. If your company doesn't have a formal email policy, you should. Tune in next week to find out why. Here's to your success,