

Brian Collett discusses the importance of writing emails correctly

## GETTING E-MAIL ETIQUETTE RIGHT

Perhaps you receive messages reading something like: hotel bookd speke soon regards Jim PS nothmg yet on German deal."

You know what the sender is saying but the language is inelegant, misspelt and unpunctuated. Or perhaps an e-mail from somebody you hardly know says: "Hi, Bill, got yr msg. Let's meet for drinkies and nibbles to discuss biz. How about Fri afro at one? Harry."

Again, you get the drift but the sender is far too familiar and uses slang and abbreviations.

Both examples would make Christopher Wood shudder. Wood, who spent 12 years teaching English to Japanese businesspeople, felt so strongly about e-mailing that he sat down at his language school Topcopi in Oxford and wrote a distance-learning course on it. To him clear e-mail English in business is vital because English is the universal commercial language and e-mail is the dominant communication medium of the day.

Yet he finds many e-mails are sloppy, over-friendly and even discourteous because they breach local customs. At worst, a bad e-mail is dangerous.

### Formal approach

So, what constitutes an e-mail that shows that an organisation is efficiently managed and worth doing business with?

"Imagine letter-writing years ago," says Wood. 'An e-mail should read like a letter.'

So the good business e-mail is really a formal letter, not a casual conversation. It starts professionally - not with "Hi" or "Howdy" - though the first sentence can be a brief pleasantry. The message should have a warm tone and end with a positive proposal or call for action. "The warm approach gets the recipient on your side and helps to develop a relationship," says Wood.

The language should be precise, particularly as any stated prices or delivery dates could be the basis of a sales contract. The message should be brief, and anything complicated should be expressed as simply as possible. Pithy e-mails are easier to understand and are more effective. In fact, the first sentence after the introductory greeting should be strong and clear and contain vital information. If it is woolly and vague some recipients may not read on. Definite points are more likely to attract the swift response that is required.

Large or complicated documents that have to be sent bye-mail should be re-worded in a concise and readable form. They should be broken up into digestible paragraphs separated by line spaces. Huge blocks of type are horribly off-putting. However, companies should always send very long documents by post or fax. They are irritating when they arrive as e-mails.

Always remember too that many people are sensitive about their names. This is important, for example, when communications are going to Japan as the Japanese put their surnames first. The convention also often applies in Italy. Generally, problems do not arise as it is usually clear which is the surname. However, anyone not conversant with the convention might be confused if they see a name such as Pippo Baudo, who happens to be an Italian television presenter. The advice is to check first. Incidentally, Baudo is the surname.

In the body of the e-mail the writer should avoid using abbreviations. RAF and Nato are acceptable but most abbreviations, such as LEA, meaning local education authority, and 101, signifying "laugh out loud", could be gobbledygook to the recipient.

If you want to keep the recipient sweet, avoid "urgent" and "immediately". If a matter is pressing it is better to say you would appreciate an early reply in order to make a deadline.

Real horrors are messages in capitals and the liberal use of exclamation marks. They are turn-offs because they shout at the reader. Wood believes the right sign-off is equally important. "Yours sincerely" is safer the first time, but "Kind regards" can be used once the ice has been broken.

If you are replying answer all the sender's questions. It is businesslike and generally avoids the exasperation of receiving the same questions again.

## **Confidential information**

People can forget that an e-mail is a permanent form of communication, just like a letter, so do not send anything that should not go beyond the recipient. Criticism of another person could be embarrassing if it was spread around. It could be printed out and kept on record, and the worst consequence is that it could be libellous if not provable. More general confidential information should never go by e-mail in case it ends up in the wrong hands. All this means that e-mailed confidential remarks or information could cost the company in damages or lost business.

A final piece of advice is always to read through an e-mail before hitting the 'send' button. You don't want to say the wrong things inadvertently or make an ass of yourself. Wood's course teaches that carelessness indicates incompetence, reduces credibility and gives the recipient a superior feeling, not the best basis for business dealing.

As with most business advice, the bottom line is money. The image of an efficient company encourages business.

The principles of the course have won the approval of Andy James, European manager of the London-based global headhunting company SBR. He has a multinational workforce and says company e-mails have to be correct and informal as recruitment is essentially a people business.

## **Additional tips**

Kathey Bailey, who presents ProSeminar's *Written Communication Skills* course (part of the Institute's Public Short Course Programme for Management & Professional Development), adds a few additional tips and an alternative perspective. She points to the value of distinguishing between formal e-mails which need to be written more like a letter and informal ones which can adopt the stylistic characteristics of a compliment slip. She also emphasises the importance of a clear structure. "The first paragraph," she suggests, "should clarify the reason for writing; the middle of the e-mail should present the facts and the last paragraph should focus on any action to be taken."

Kathey also points to the benefits of covering only one subject in an e-mail. "This makes it easier for the reader to file, action or delete. If you want to write to someone about three different things, they should be on three separate e-mails. And," she adds, "don't forget to choose; useful subject line so that the reader knows straight away what the e-mail's about."

What do the business schools think? "E-mails are the way we communicate now," says Professor Cary Cooper CBE CCMI, Pro-Vice Chancellor External Relations at Lancaster University. "Even contractual matters are handled this way. The kind of relationship you have must be reflected in an e-mail. If you have an established relationship with a customer or supplier the tone can be more informal. However, too much informality at the start of a relationship can be detrimental. You need the social skills to know how to write the e-mail.

"But, of course, people always ought to write good English. Even if you are being more informal the grammar should be just as good."

*Professional Manager Mar 2007*