

Effective Electronic Communication

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Day One

Did you know email messaging now exceeds telephone traffic and is the dominant form of business communication? Businesses report many of their employees spend three to four hours a day on email. And most of us would say, "What did we ever do without email?"

However, along with this change in the way we communicate has come a new set of challenges. Communicating electronically is a very different medium, and if you are going to be effective in your job, you will need to learn how to use this tool and not abuse it. And that includes not only email, but Facebook, Twitter or X, and all the others which seem to pop up daily.

I thought it might be helpful to examine ways to improve our electronic communication skills. The way we communicate creates impressions and perceptions of us as people. And as Christ-followers, we not only represent ourselves, but more importantly, we are ambassadors for Jesus Christ. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *for we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men* (2 Corinthians 8:21). I think it behooves us to take pains to improve our communication skills.

Let me begin by saying that as convenient as electronic communication is, it cannot replace the power of personal interaction. There are many times when face-to-face and voice-to-voice communication is absolutely the better way to go. No doubt we've lost a lot of personal touch because we use electronic means too often and too much. It's much more difficult to communicate care and compassion by email than it is in person.

It's true we may communicate more often because we have these convenient ways to do it, but it's also true that the impersonal nature of electronic communication can cause us to be careless in how we say things. It can make us sound cold and harsh. We must learn to put ourselves in the shoes of the person reading our emails and find ways to communicate courtesy and thoughtfulness electronically.

Day Two

How is your email etiquette? Recently a good friend was telling me the woes she is having with email communication. She is a computer programmer, and in order to help her coworkers, she sends emails with instructions on how to avoid problems, use the system better, etc. Her motivation is totally right; she wants to help. But some of her coworkers interpret her emails as being critical. What is she doing wrong?

Proverbs 16:21 says: *The wise in heart are called discerning, and gracious words promote instruction.* Another translation says *sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness.* This principle holds true for emails as much as it does for the spoken word. Your choice of words always makes a difference. And remember asking is usually better than telling.

A good way to judge how your words will be perceived is to read your email out loud to yourself before you send it and see how the words sound when they are spoken. That will often give you a clue as to the tone of your message and how it could be perceived by the person receiving it.

Some email dos and don'ts:

- Be careful with your use of emotional symbols—emojis. You may find it clever or funny, but the recipient may not. Save those for casual messages between friends.
- Remember not everyone is as computer savvy as you are, and they may not understand those online abbreviations that have become popular. So, be careful using those.
- Start your business emails with a salutation. If you're writing to three people or less, use their names: Hello, Tom, Jane and Linda. If you're writing to more than three, you can use a common greeting, something as simple as "Hello." But starting an email with no salutation can be perceived as harsh. If you're involved in a long email going back and forth, you can eliminate the salutation after the first reply, but when in doubt, it never hurts to use a greeting.

This is one area where I have to watch myself, because I just want to get to the meat of the message and skip the "niceties," thinking they're not necessary. But it truly can make a difference in the minds of others, so take the time to add that salutation.

Day Three

I'm examining email etiquette! Have you found emailing to be a blessing or a curse? It has certainly improved our ability to communicate quickly and easily, but it can become our master. We can truly become addicted and in bondage to this way of communicating. It's a tool we need to use, for sure, but we need to use it wisely and correctly.

A few more rules of etiquette for emails, in addition to the ones I shared with you yesterday:

- Be informal but not sloppy. Your email communication represents you and your organization, so it's just as important to use correct spelling, grammar and punctuation as it would be for a printed communication.
- When you have an email for a group of people, consider how much more effective it might be if the email were individually sent to each person. Now, it's certainly not necessary to do this with every group email, but for important communications you definitely want to be read, an email addressed to me personally, for example, will carry more weight than one addressed to me and several others.
- Using all capital letters looks as if you're shouting, so only use it when you want to shout! Maybe there are times to shout for joy and that can be effective, but most of the time it has a negative effect. Instead, use a font color to highlight things.
- Generally, the fewer words you use, the more effectively you will communicate. Most of us use far more words than are necessary to get our messages across, and people just start to tune us out. A good suggestion is to edit every email before you send it and eliminate unnecessary words. Less is definitely more when it comes to emails.

The Apostle Paul wrote *so whatever you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God* (1 Corinthians 10:31). Well, as a Christ-follower that means your communication skills—which are things you do—should be done for God's glory. I send emails every day; most of you do as well. I want even the emails I send to bring honor, not dishonor, to my Lord.

Day Four

What is the most annoying thing about electronic communication to you? Don't you wish that in order to use emails, everyone had to agree to certain rules of etiquette? No doubt you get lots of junk emails and long emails and annoying emails regularly. The question is, are you careful to avoid those email mistakes yourself?

For example, don't be the person who sends out a constant stream of informational emails to people who have not requested them or don't need them. For example, forwarding articles or other emails that have a political bent to them is truly not smart professionally. And getting a constant stream of jokes or funny stories can become annoying. Even inspirational emails can be overdone.

I confess these streams of emails are the ones I generally don't read. I look at the subject, see who it's from, and determine if it's worth my time to read a long email. However, people I know and trust occasionally send me very worthwhile things to read, and because it is infrequent, I know they have thoughtfully sent something I will want to read, so I do. It's good to remember anything can be overdone. Again, less is more.

If you have a particularly complex communication or if there is significant emotional content to a message you need to send, determine if sending it by email is the best way to go. For example, if you need to apologize, it may be best to do that by phone or in person. Or when you're delivering a message you know they don't want to hear, such as denying a request of some sort, that is usually done best in a personal communication. Don't use email communication to avoid uncomfortable messages or to cover up a mistake. In the long run, it will create more problems for you.

Day Five

Watch out for that send button! That is my word of caution as I conclude my thoughts on effective electronic communication. That send button on your computer makes it easy to get a message off right away, but it also can become your Achilles heel if it is used carelessly.

Remember everything you send through email is out there somewhere in cyberspace forever and ever! You may intend it to be for one person's eyes only, but it can very easily be distributed or read by people who were never supposed to read it. Whatever you say in cyberspace cannot be taken back. You lose control of your message once you hit send. Those emails can come back to harm you, to destroy friendships, even to ruin careers.

Not long ago I wrote an email about a sensitive situation and was just about to send it when I realized there was no way I wanted that email in cyberspace. And then, also not long ago, I sent an email to the wrong person. I chose the correct first name, but failed to see that there was more than one person in my address book with that first name. I sent it to the wrong person. Thankfully it wasn't of a sensitive nature so there was no harm done, but I just realized again how easy it is to send an email to the wrong person.

A good rule of thumb is to read over every word in your email before you send it. Check the name or names and make sure they are correct. And then ask yourself, is there anything in this email that should not be in writing? If in doubt, don't! Pick up the phone or wait until you see that person to send that message. It's not as fast, but it could save you lots of trouble in the future.

Proverbs 21:23 says, *those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity.* Guarding your words—even those electronic words—can truly help you avoid calamity.