

Six ways for EAs to communicate more effectively

Steuart Snooks lays out a set of strategies you can use to write emails that get the reader to take the action you need

The challenge with any form of written communication is to ensure that the reader is able to understand and appropriately respond to your message. This is difficult at any time but especially so when using email. Recent research of Australian business leaders shows that communication skills are regarded as the number one soft skill needed for success into the future. And nearly 80 percent of business communication is sent via email, so it makes sense to start writing better emails as the first step in improving communication skills.

1 Think first

Two key questions to ask yourself are ‘Is email the most appropriate way to communicate for this message?’ While email is an ideal medium for many messages, there are many which would be more effectively communicated by something other than email. If your message is urgent or contains complexity, ambiguity or confidentiality, you should consider a more appropriate method to communicate the message. Perhaps a phone call or face-to-face conversation is more appropriate.

While email may be quick at the ‘front end’ of the communication process, it can often cost even more time at the ‘back end’ of the process to either follow up a message that hasn’t been responded to or to correct a misunderstanding or any unintended outcomes.

2 Write better subject lines

The subject line is probably the single most important aspect of your message. A truly effective subject line has the three following components;

- Your desired outcome: using one of the four outcomes mentioned below
- Timeframe: indicate your preferred timeframe for the desired outcome
- Description: a clear, concise description of the subject



Every email you send will have one of the following four outcomes or actions: Action required, Response requested, Read-only, FYI. By doing this, you help your reader to more effectively prioritise their inbox and the resulting actions that are needed.

For best results, you should also specify a deadline for the outcome you desire—you’re much more likely to get a timely response for your message than if you don’t specify a deadline or timeframe. Finally, thinking through the desired outcome of your message also helps you to more accurately target who you send it to. Those who need to take action or respond should be placed in the ‘To’ address line while those who only need to read it can be put in the ‘CC’ line.

3 Automate your email follow up

This is a key strategy for EAs who find that many of the emails you send require you to also follow them up. One way to keep track of these

is to flag them for follow up so you don't have to rely on your memory. As you're composing the message, simply click the follow-up icon and select when you wish to follow up.

However, simply flagging a message is often not enough—you probably need to also add a reminder for a specific date and time. A flagged message still requires you to chase after it at some time in the future whereas a flagged message with a reminder comes back to you at the nominated date and time—in the meantime, you can safely forget about it.

Outlook users can keep track of all these emails that require follow up in the For Follow Up folder, located under Search Folders in your folder list.

This folder will show you any emails you have flagged for follow up, regardless of which folder it is in. You can even set a separate reminder on the email itself for the reader and make their reminder two hours or two days before your own! This way, that's one less phone call or email you have to make as the first step of follow up is automated.

4 Why the inverted pyramid structure is best for email

For most messages, the best results will be gained by using the same approach that journalists and newspapers use. When you read a newspaper, the first paragraph tells you the main point and then the rest of the article is spent supporting that point with the background details, information, explanations and reasons in decreasing degree of importance.

This is known as the Inverted Pyramid structure and it is highly valued because readers can leave the story at any point and understand it, even if they don't have all the details. The same approach works well when writing an email.

Remember, most of your email messages will arrive to your recipient as an interruption and/or mixed in with lots of other messages. That's why it is vital that you quickly communicate the main point of your message so that it engages their interest. They can then read as much or little of the remaining message as they personally need to then take action on it.

5 Why you should write an email backwards

Do you sometimes wonder why you don't get a response to your email? Or the response is slow? Or that it doesn't actually answer the question you asked? One way to improve the results you get from the emails you send is to write the email backwards! Let me explain.

Your email software is set up so you write an

email in the sequence To, Subject then Message. However, for best results try writing new messages in the following sequence.

Write your message first and then edit it. Be sure to use the 'inverted pyramid' format we discussed above.

Waiting until after you write the content ensures that the Subject Line accurately summarises and reflects the meaning of your email message. You will have a much clearer idea of how to accurately and succinctly summarise your message in the subject line after you have written your message rather than before.

Address your message as the final step –you'll find that you have a clearer idea of who needs to get this message, who needs only to read it and who can be left out altogether after you've written a message rather than before. When you do this as the last step, you'll tend to omit people for whom there is no action or response required (or place them in the 'cc' line if they all they have to do is read it), reducing unnecessary email.

6 Use Delay Delivery

In business life, timing is important. Using Delay Delivery allows you to schedule your outgoing email for when it's most likely to have maximum impact. This strategy allows you to write email when it suits you but have it arrive at a time that best suits the receiver or ensure it is delivered at an optimal time to achieve the result you desire.

Using Delay Delivery so it only arrives during business hours also enhances your professionalism. That way you're not seen to be writing email at all sorts of odd hours of the day or week. This helps you control expectations and have influence with others. When you send a message that arrives at odd hours, recipients will wonder if/when they are expected to respond i.e. straight away, soon or sometime later.

It also provides you with the opportunity to go back to a message and make any edits or improvements before it is sent. For example, you might wish to 'soften' a harshly worded message or add some details or an attachment not thought of when it was originally composed.

It also reduces the chances of your email being missed. If you send a message 'after hours' it could be sitting in your recipient's inbox along with dozens of other messages when they check their inbox in the morning. Amongst these will be a host of spam and other low priority messages that will have the recipient in a 'delete' or 'purge' frame of mind - there's a risk your message could be lost in this process! ☹

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THE EXPERT

Steuart Snooks is an email and workplace productivity expert who works with busy professionals to help them get control of all their emails. He has developed a series of workshops, presentations, webinars, coaching and resources that outline the best practice skills for mastering your email.