

## A Salesperson's Guide to Using E-mail

By Joe Rickard

It is no secret that e-mail has forever changed the way we communicate both personally and professionally—for better or for worse. While e-mail makes communication easier and more efficient, it comes with a significant amount of responsibility. Understanding the e-mail “rules of the road” has never been more important.

In a recent article in Money magazine, author and journalist Jean Chatzky said 25 percent of managers at big companies feel overwhelmed by their daily communications, and 55 percent of workers read e-mail immediately after they get them. Mastering the basic principles of e-mail will ensure that the message you send will be received, understood and result in action. Writing effective e-mail will ensure better communications and, potentially, a shortened sales cycle.

### **E-mail “on the go” has complicated the situation**

The widespread use of mobile e-mail devices is causing another communication transition. Now messages must be sent faster and be written in a more crisp and succinct manner. When I travel, I have left the default message “Sent from my Wireless Handheld” on my replies so my clients know I am sending a shorter version of what might have been a more lengthy reply if I were at my desk.

When your client or manager knows you have a mobile e-mail device, they will expect a fast response, and salespeople need to be prepared for this expectation.

How e-mail and Web communications evolve, only time will tell. This changing landscape will make face-to-face meetings even more critical when it comes to communicating high impact and complex printing solutions.

In the printing industry, most salespeople have not had training in how to effectively use and manage e-mail. Too often printing salespeople abuse e-mail by poorly constructing the content of the message so their “pitch” isn't clear or substituting e-mail where a phone call or face-to-face meeting would be more effective.

Face-to-face meetings, e-mail, text messaging, phone calls and even Facebook and LinkedIn are communication methods that successful sales people must master. Knowing how and when to use each medium is critical. It can be argued that the medium is the message, and it is true that each has its purpose. In-person calls are still the most

preferred approach for salespeople. However, to get that important face-to-face meeting where important information will be exchanged, e-mail and phone calls must be used.

### **E-mail is an important sales communication tool**

Like most of us, printing customers are also receiving hundreds of e-mails daily that require a response. The Radicati Research Group predicts that e-mail usage will increase by over 30 percent a day by 2011. Since the use of e-mail will continue to proliferate in the future, knowing when to use e-mail is vital. Many executives prefer to communicate through e-mail. It is a great medium for a quick communication. Taking your time and following some basic principles will give you a competitive advantage.

While I still recommend face-to-face meetings as the most important sales tool—e-mail is now an important part of the equation. Here are a few best practices for e-mail that, with patience, can be mastered by all printing sales professionals:

### **Do not send pricing quotes or complex communications through e-mail**

Presenting a selling proposal and communicating customer solutions to new customers are best presented face-to-face. We have found the sending of price quotes and sharing detailed product or company information via e-mail is common in the print industry. This practice is a symptom of salespeople who are taking short-cuts or who are fearful of customer rejection. If selling complex printing solutions could be accomplished through the use of the Internet, there would be no need for highly commissioned salespeople. Use e-mail to reinforce key points, confirm and schedule phone or face-to-face meetings, provide updates and answer simple questions.

### **Do not miss an opportunity to communicate your company's value**

When trying to gain an appointment or reinforce a key selling point, have a well-written value proposition prepared. This is the statement that clearly identifies what you do and why you do it better than your competitors. In every e-mail sent, there should be a selling message embedded in the text. Never miss an opportunity to reinforce your company's value to your prospect.

### **Do not rely solely on spell check**

Spelling and grammar mistakes are unacceptable. As many have regretfully found out, spell check does not catch all mistakes. If you are in a rush or there is any doubt or concern that there could be a mistake, hold the material for a few hours. When you have some time, come back to it for a final edit. Some people find it is useful to print out the work for a final review before sending it. For important communications, have someone else do an edit.

### **Do not send bad news to customers through e-mail**

Communicating missed print deadlines or excuses for not meeting customer requirements via e-mail is a major customer irritant. People often take the easy way out by sending an e-mail. Attempting to talk to the customer in person or on the phone will often be painful but most appreciated.

### **Smile when you write your e-mail**

Since you will not be there when the e-mail is opened, make sure it conveys a positive message—you do not need to rely on smiley faces in your e-mail messages to achieve this, just keep your writing upbeat and friendly. You don't want to share unintended or negative feelings, and the tone of voice in an e-mail can be easy to misinterpret. Never send an e-mail when you are angry—cool off and send it later.

### **Create descriptive subject lines that reflect the purpose of the e-mail**

The subject line is the first thing the reader sees. Making sure you are clearly conveying the purpose of your e-mail will give you credibility. It also helps the receiver to easily find the e-mail when conducting a search by topic. Always use the subject line. Leaving it blank will cause some readers to ignore your e-mail.

### **Keep e-mails and paragraphs short**

As a rule, I keep paragraphs less than an inch. If they are longer, I either shorten/tighten them up or split the paragraph. Many people skim written material. You do not want them to miss a key point. Using bullet points can often focus the reader on important material. If the e-mail cannot be read without scrolling down, it is too long. If possible avoid attachments. With the wide use of mobile e-mail devices, attachments are a major obstacle.

### **One objective per e-mail**

It is best to keep each e-mail limited to one objective. Busy readers will often move on after they think they get the idea. It is a good practice to state the key point of why you are writing in the first sentence. Many readers will miss the important points if key content is buried in the body of a long e-mail.

### **Stay away from personal information**

It is OK to open communication with “I hope all is well” or “It was great to see you at the meeting” to relax the reader. From there, quickly get to the point and keep personal information out of business communications. If you want to be treated seriously, you need to be professional.

### **Do not put any information in written communication that could ever prove embarrassing or inappropriate**

Many a career and professional reputation has been ruined by irreversible content in an e-mail. E-mail is not the forum for discussing your big weekend on the town—especially not when it's the company e-mail account. Assume that every e-mail you send will be shared.

### **Avoid conventions commonly used in personal e-mail**

Expressions such as LOL, BTW, etc. should be avoided with business communications. Avoid using colors, backgrounds and borders. In a formal e-mail, keep the distractions e.g. quotes, links and “smiley” faces to minimum. Appreciate the other person's time and position.

### **Keep a file of outstanding communications to emulate**

If I see a sentence, a great technique or an interesting style, I save it and try to incorporate it into my own writing. In business, e-mail has replaced the personal business letter. It has evolved to a more formal and professional communication method.

### **Never send “draft” messages to supervisors or customers**

Even if they ask you for a draft, treat all communications to key readers as final. You never get a second chance to repair a bad impression of your writing. Assume that your e-mail will be sent to others.

### **Volunteer to write company communications, marketing collaterals, newsletters, etc.**

The boss will appreciate it and you will be improving your skills. Once in awhile, ask a talented writer or colleague to evaluate your writing. You should be prepared for constructive criticism.

### **Stick to the rule of three**

The endless parade of e-mails from a salesperson is annoying to customers. If you can't get it done with three e-mail exchanges on the same subject, pick up the phone.

### **Slow down!**

We all feel pressured to provide a fast response via e-mail. However, an e-mail sent in haste has caused salespeople more embarrassment than most care to recount. From sending an RFP to the wrong client, to misspelling a potential client's name, to “replying all” when you were BCC'd, an e-mail mistake can cause game-changing results.

Take your time with each e-mail that you send. Make sure you triple-check that you are writing to your intended recipient and that you are attaching the correct documents. Read

over your e-mail at least two or three times before sending, especially if it is being sent to a client.

In our sales training workshops, we encourage salespeople to use e-mail to reinforce key points, follow-up on important details, and use it in conjunction with the phone to gain appointments.

For [selling](#) complex print solutions, it is not an effective primary selling vehicle. However, e-mail is a great time saving communication tool to quickly disseminate information and to shorten the sales cycle. It is not a replacement for face-to-face selling, but it is an integral complement in today's world.

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