

by Don Lancaster

Eminently Effective Email Etiquette

I strongly felt that last postal rate increase was totally unacceptable. As a result, I've set a personal goal to reduce all my USPS costs by 90 percent. To do this, I instead use UPS Blue for my [InfoPack](#) consulting services. And UPS brown for book and [surplus bargain](#) sales. I have eliminated mailed catalogs by offering better ones faster online. Through my [Guru's Lair](#) website at www.tinaja.com.

Despite all the supposed resistance to online commercial messages, these catalogs are my most popular downloads. See [ACROCAT.PDF](#) or [TWENTY47.PDF](#) for catalog secrets, or those actual catalogs at www.tinaja.com/synlib01.html and www.tinaja.com/barg01.html. The secret here is that wanted or "pull" commercial info will be strongly sought out.

I've made email my dominant form of communications. Since it appears a lot of others are doing likewise, here's a few email guidelines that seem to work for me...

Avoid email addiction— One sure sign you're spending too much time online is when AOL asks you to return all of the disks they've sent you. Another warning is when you check your email way too often. For most people, twice a day is excessive. Be sure you average at least three useful messages each time you check your mail. Preferably ten.

Keep your messages short— Any effective email message should be readable on a single screen. Without your reader having to scroll. If you must provide more detail or extra info, use links to appropriate web site content.

Or, if you have to, use attachments. But studiously *avoid using any attachments that have a high virus potential*. A PDF file or a GIF image is probably appropriate. Any .exe files are suspect and should be strictly avoided.

When answering an ongoing dialog, leave only a bare minimum of previous message content. Only enough that your recipient clearly knows what you're talking about. But do acknowledge editing with a <snip> or whatever.

Proof carefully— Always read and then carefully re-read an email before you send it out. *Do so out loud*. At their least, spelling errors lower credibility. At worst, they can create economic disaster. Few things are more infuriating than a bad url or an otherwise broken link.

Be careful with humor— Sadly, humor is exceptionally easy to misinterpret online. Or take as an insult. Especially if they don't get the joke. "Chemists like hydrogen so much that for years it has been number one on their charts". I got dozens of emails pointing out that this was not the main reason hydrogen is element number one.

Age emotional responses— It is easy to get carried away by an insult, an intentional troll, or even a rational criticism that clearly proves you wrong. *Never respond immediately!* Always wait at least one session (and preferably a full day) before reacting. Waiting lets you sharpen up your response, check your facts, and provide helpful links.

Remember that *email is forever*. It is able to show up at the wierdest times in the strangest of places. Do something impulsive, and it is *certain* to return to haunt you.

Don't answer the unanswerable— Or any stuff that doesn't need an answer in the first place. *Your simplest way to deal with an awkward piece of email is to ignore it*. Avoid ever answering an answer. Unless you want a penpal for life. It is always best to let that other party have the last word. Seek ongoing dialog *only* when it's clearly to your pleasure or profit to do so. And flush everything else.

Stay rational about spam— First, of course, *never send out anything the recipient does not want*. If you ever have more than three destination addresses on any one email, be sure that *all* the names listed are willing subscribers. And verify so often. Note that an upset enough spamee can (and will) *severely* do you in any time they care to do so.

On the receiving end, use your delete key for obvious junk. Generally, irate comments or delete requests flat out do not work. Besides wasting your time and energy. But if the spammer is a trade journal or is otherwise reasonable, a simple "remove" may help. Rarely, a formally worded letter of complaint to an ISP can work wonders. But very often, the return address is an innocent bystander.

Provide a shopping cart— When you're selling stuff, people are rightfully reluctant to include VISA and personal info in an unsecure email. To dramatically improve your sales, pick one of the shopping cart or other secure transaction services and go with them.

These services are quickly changing and merging, so I am still experimenting with finding one I can recommend. But several major long term winners are almost certain to emerge "real soon now".

Match response to region— Over many years of running a helpline, I have found those politically incorrect regional stereotypes are largely accurate. Utah is religious. It rains in Seattle. Lala land is, uh, Lala land. Maine is dour.

Mensa candidates are rare in the deep south. New Joisee and Lon Guileland are highly argumentive. They get even more so after they retire and move to Florida.

Adjust the tone and formality of your email to where your recipient is coming from. At the very least, be more formal to the East, more casual to the West. More stilted to Fortune 500 and more friendly to individuals.

Or go against these guidelines at your peril.

Say "please" and "thank you" – Nuff said on this.

Stalk your emailee – When an unexpected email comes in that may involve your time, energy, or dollars, it pays to find out as much as you can about the sender. Obviously, if they've got their own web site, you'll go to it and find out where they are coming from. Website details are findable through rs.internic.net/cgi-bin/whois If they are using some obvious ISP, finding out where they live and their overall ISP service vibes can be of help.

Another ploy is to use www.dejanews.com/home_ps.shtml to see which newsgroups they are posting to. And who is saying what about them. From the type of group and the frequency of posting, you can learn a lot in a hurry. There's also the "web denizens" sites such as www.whowhere.com, bigfoot.com, or www.infospace.com Finally, you can check their address against a map site such as www.mapquest.com or www6.MapsOnUs.com Or even view an aerial photo of their neighborhood at terraserver.microsoft.com

Allow default email addressing – If you have a virtual or a real web site, it is usually a good idea to tell your ISP that you will accept *any* character string before their "@" as a valid email address. This takes care of misspellings, bad guesses, and such things as webmaster@tinaja.com

Some lesser tips – Have a stable and portable email address. Your own web site is the best way to do this. *Anything that can be misunderstood in a message will be.* Keep copies of anything negotiable. Be sure to backup your address lists and bookmarks. These are easily ignored during a routine backup because they are deeply buried in your browser software. Avoid emailing drivel and jokes. Such as why it takes 1327 Usenet messages to change a light bulb.

Do save any and all email messages that might have ongoing consequences. Writeable CD's are only a buck each these days. They sure hold a lot of email.

Always remember that *net* stands for *not entirely true*.

Avoid the cheap thrill of piling on the clueless in news posts. Or otherwise known as "gangbanging the cripples". Never criticize spelling. Chances are overwhelming there'll be a typo in your reply. Ignore foreign inquiries unless you specifically are seeking them out. Offer a reasonably "cute" sigfile. But be sure to change it every so often.

And finally, of course...

It doesn't matter how long your email address is – It is what you do with it that really counts. ♦

Microcomputer pioneer and guru Don Lancaster is the author of 35 books and countless articles. Don maintains a US technical helpline you'll find at (520) 428-4073, besides offering all his own books, reprints and consulting services.

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