

Keeping up with email is part of today's workplace protocol

To avoid offending customers, business partners and staff, use these 10 tactics to manage your messages

B2BExpert



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For business professionals, being a good communicator is at the top of the list of skills that can make or break your reputation. With so many mediums of communication considered a necessity, one must stay on top of all of them seamlessly. Each presents its own challenges, idiosyncrasies and general expectations in terms of what is considered customary, especially in terms of response times.

Email is one medium that can be especially difficult to stay on top of because the volume of messages received can be overwhelming. Not to mention, many emails lack clear subjects and/or succinct content to make them fast and easy to decipher. As an executive coach, I help people increase their productivity, improve communications, and hone their professional "edge." Advising clients on how to tackle email is frequently part of a larger strategy to achieve greater effectiveness and efficiency overall.

You can create order with hundreds of emails hitting your inbox each day by implementing a few key email management tactics. Professionals who want to generate and to maintain a strong image invest the time to do so. Employees, customers and business partners alike can be offended and relationships adversely affected when email messages go unanswered or take what the sender views as unreasonable amounts of time to wait for a response. For email in particular, one to three business days is a customary response time, unless the message is marked urgent.

Here are the top 10 tactics to employ to ensure that you can manage your email like a pro:

1. Use the "junk email" feature in your email program to filter out obvious SPAM.
2. Direct personal email to a nonbusiness account.

3. Use email tools to highlight messages from your boss, key customers, key staff members, etc., so that you can more easily prioritize key messages.

4. Buy a Blackberry, Droid or iPhone and use IMAP to synch between your device and computer. You will be amazed by the productivity increase from working on email while you are waiting in line, waiting for your meeting attendee(s), etc.

5. Use automated messages to alert others when you are out of the office or out of the country and may incur delays in responding to messages.

6. Ask your staff and suppliers to add clear subjects to their messages and to be specific about whether a response is needed and, if so, by when.

7. Mark all emails requiring follow-up with a flag and assign yourself a due date so you don't lose track.

8. Sort your emails by date received and draw a line after three days; double-check to ensure that anything more than three days is not awaiting a response.

9. Acknowledge emails that may take you longer to respond to. Simply letting the sender know that you received his/her message and giving a date when you will respond will do wonders for managing expectations.

10. Once a week, clean up your inbox. Delete unnecessary emails and file key messages (if you didn't do so immediately). Like a clean desk, a clean email account can remove stress and make it clearer what needs to be done by when.

Email might seem overwhelming, but demonstrating that you can manage your communications well builds good will and makes good business sense. One final thought: emailing responsively is communicating responsibly — the hallmark of a true professional.

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