

Rules for Corporate Email Etiquette

Why email have rules?

Email is a big part of your company communications to customers, to business partners and internally within the company. In fact, sometimes email is the only communication our customer may have with us.

Rule 1 – Answer swiftly your customers

Send email to customers because they want quick responses. The golden rule for email is to reply within 24 hours, and preferably within the same working day. If your response email is complicated, just send an email confirming receipt and letting them know that you will get back to them. This will ease the customer's mind!

Rule 2 – Use a meaningful subject line

Try to use a subject that is meaningful to the recipient as well as yourself. For instance, when you send an email about a product, it is better to mention the actual name of the product, e.g. 'Product A information' than to just say 'Product information'. It also makes it easier to search for old emails when the subject line is relevant and specific to the content of the email.

Rule 3 – Don't abuse the "Reply to All"

Only use Reply to All if you really need your message to be seen by each person who received the original message. Sending off irrelevant or unnecessary replies to everyone on the list is just annoying and confusing. However, if communication is vital between all parties in an email thread, use the Reply to All to keep everyone in the loop. If you only use Reply in such a case, the recipient may have to forward your email to everyone else, which is frustrating and disjointed.

Rule 4 – Use the BCC Field When sending to many people

Some people put all the email addresses in the To: field. There are two drawbacks to doing that:

- the recipient knows that you have sent the same message to a large number of recipients, and
- you are publicizing someone else's email address without their permission.

Instead, consider using the Bcc: field. Put your mailing list group name in To: field in their email (leaving the To: field blank may look like spam). If you have Microsoft Outlook and Word you can do a mail merge so each recipient receives their own email, or create a mailing group in your email software if it has that utility.

Rule 5 – Don't leave out the message thread

Include the original mail in your reply, in other words click 'Reply', instead of 'New Mail'. We all receive many emails and we can't remember each individual email. Leaving the thread may take a fraction longer in download time, but it saves the recipient time looking for the related emails in their inbox. Remember, emails are not like regular printed correspondence - the name of the game is to keep it quick and efficient – so include the thread!

Rule 6 – Read your email before you send it

Treat email like any other official company document. Read it before you send it. Spelling and grammar errors are just as unfortunate in email as anywhere else in your corporate correspondence. Look out for potential misunderstandings, the tone, and inappropriate comments; we use email because it is quick and easy but precisely that quickness may cause more trouble than you bargained for!

Rule 7 – Confidential information

Email is just too risky a place to include confidential information. Ask yourself if you would want the content of your email displayed on a bulletin board. Never make libelous, sexist or racially discriminating comments in emails, even as a joke. Consider implementing a Disclaimer on the bottom of all corporate emails with statements on Breach of Confidentiality, Virus Liability, etc. (Yes, you can be sued for sending an email that contains a virus!)

Rule 8 – Abbreviations & emoticons

Be careful using email abbreviations such as BTW (by the way) and LOL (laugh out loud) in business emails. Even today, some people still don't know what they mean, so it's better to drop them. And emoticons, such as the smiley :-), don't belong in business email unless a relaxed form of communication has long been established with the customer.

Rule 9 – Don't attach unnecessary files

Wherever possible try to compress attachments and only send attachments when they are productive. Make sure you have good virus software in place to scan your outgoing emails – a customer would not be happy if you send them documents riddled with viruses!

Rule 10 – Don't forward junk

Don't forward chain letters, virus hoaxes, chain email solicitations for charitable causes even if they sound bona fide, funny pictures and jokes. Don't ever send or forward emails containing libelous, defamatory, offensive, racist or obscene remarks. Just one offensive remark can result in a multi-million dollar court case for you and the company.

Rule 11 – Be concise

Do not make an email longer than it needs to be. Email is harder to read than printed communications. A long email can be very discouraging and can be abandoned before the recipient gets to your final point all the way down at the bottom. If it has to be long, consider including a synopsis at the top of the email.

Rule 12 – Answer all questions

Make sure you answer all the questions and pre-empt new questions in your reply. If you don't answer all the questions in the original email, you're wasting your own, company's and your customer's time. Worse still, you are leaving the customer frustrated. By answering all questions and pre-empting further inquiries, you are making a great impression and reflecting thoughtful customer service. For example, a question regarding the types of credit cards you accept can be replied to with the list of cards, information on other payment methods and even a link to your website order information page!

Rule 13 – Make it personal

Did you know that the most effective word in marketing is "you"? Not only should the email be personally addressed, it should also include personal, i.e. customized, content. For this reason auto replies are usually not very effective. When you get some questions over and over, such as directions to your office or how to subscribe to your newsletter, save these texts as response templates and paste them into your message when you need them. You can save your templates in a Word document, or use pre-formatted emails.

Rule 14 – Use the proper structure & layout

Reading from a screen is more difficult than reading from paper so the structure and layout is very important for email messages. Make your paragraphs short and use blank lines between each paragraph. When making points, number them or separate each point with blank lines to keep the overview.

Rule 15 – Don't overuse the High Priority function

We all know the story of the boy who cried wolf. If you overuse the high priority option, it will lose its function when you really need it. Besides, even if a mail has high priority, your message will come across as slightly aggressive if you flag it as 'high priority'. Likewise, be careful using the words Urgent or Important in the subject line.

Rule 16 – Do not write in CAPITALS

IF YOU WRITE IN CAPITALS IT SEEMS AS IF YOU ARE SHOUTING!! This can be highly annoying, difficult to read and might trigger an unwanted response in the form of a flame mail (you get yelled back at!). Therefore, try not to send email text in capitals.

Rule 17 – Be careful with formatting

Remember that when you use formatting in your emails, the sender might not be able to view formatting, or might see different fonts than you had intended. 10% of email recipients cannot read html or rich text email; they can only receive in plain text. So for them, fonts, colors and other fancy formatting is lost. When using colors, make sure it is easy to read on the background color you have selected. Remember, monitors vary in color presentation so what may look good on your monitor may be unreadable when displayed on another monitor.

Rule 18 – Do not request delivery & read receipts

This will almost always annoy your recipient before he or she has even read your message. Besides, it usually does not work anyway since the recipient could have blocked that function, or his/her software might not support it, so what is the use of using it? If you want to know whether an email was received it is better to ask the recipient to let you know that it was received.

Rule 19– Do not recall a message

Chances are that your message has already been read. A recall request just looks silly then. It is better to send an email saying you have made a mistake. This will look much more honest than trying to recall a message.

Rule 20 – Do not copy a message or attachment without permission

Do not copy a message or attachment belonging to another user without permission of the originator; you might infringe on copyright laws.

Rule 21 – Avoid long sentences

As mentioned earlier, email is harder to read than printed material. People don't give email the same brain power as they do when reading for example a letter. Try to keep your sentences to no more than 15-20 words.

Rule 22 – Keep your language gender neutral

It is correct today to avoid sexist language such as: "The customer should bring his car to our service department for an oil change". You can use "his/her" or keep it neutral by rephrasing the sentence: "The customer should bring the car to our service department for an oil change".

Rule 23 – Don't reply to spam

Spam may make you furious and you may want to reply with "flame mail". Many spam emails are sent to confirm that your email address is still valid, and by replying you are only making yourself known to dubious marketers which may result in even more spam. Just delete the spam, or use anti-spam software.

Rule 24 – Be careful with signatures

Standard email signatures along with company logo is important when you are writing mail to the external recipient for the first time. From second time onwards in the trail mail, keep signatures simple and clear. Do not use decorative fonts and formats other than company's standard email signature.

Even for internal communication keep your signature simple by adding name, extension/ mobile number and department name. Do not load your internal communication email signature with company logo, company address, website designation etc. This will help us to minimize email traffic at the server that transit and stores the email and eventually lesser mail space consumption.

Rule 25 – Avoid fancy email template

This will almost always annoy your recipient even before your message is read. Keep your email templates plain and distinct in regular business communication. Do not use fancy page colour, themes, and special gradient effects in the mail template.