



# E-mail Today!

Article 1 in the Moving Careers Higher Information Series

## Ten Years Ago....

Ten years ago who would have wagered a \$100 bill that we would be here today discussing e-mail and e-mail protocol as important to business success. Ten years ago not one of us would have been prepared to say or even think that e-mail would become more important than the fax machine, the answering machine and possibly even the telephone.

But here we are in 2007 and the reality is that e-mail has become the most important means for business and transactional communication. It is probably the most important medium for social communication, too, particularly if you are under 30.

The funny thing is – there are no formal rules pertaining to e-mail, no set procedures. It is almost like the Wild West. You must sort of feel your way and fire and volley as best you can. Of course, in the future, much will be written on the subject.

In the interim, today, and until those manuals are written, we are going to do the best we can to put some flexible structures and protocols in place, though it is unlikely that any kind of definitive right and wrong will emerge. You will, however, walk away with some heightened levels of awareness and more thoughtfulness around how you approach and handle your e-mail correspondence.

## E-mail Culture and History

I want to start with a bit of history around the e-mail culture – sort of a primer on some of the protocols and habits that have emerged today. I will discuss the very clear reasons why e-mail is so important to business, and end with ten tips for consideration in ensuring your own e-mail correspondence is more profound and more productive, giving you even more influence over your business success.

Much of the style for e-mail has emerged from past eras and communication modes. For instance, there are many three-letter acronyms that are popular for use in e-mail and instant messaging, such as LOL (Laughing Out Loud) or LUL (Love You Lots). A lot of this is wrapped up in the old radio world and Morse code. Early on, telegraphers used many of these ranging from QRX (Are you receiving me?) to QLF (are you using your left foot, meaning I can't understand).

In the early days of the computer, everyone used ASR33 teletypes. These were very slow (10 characters a second), cumbersome replacements for the Morse code key sets, but they translated your keyboard presses into their own kind of Morse code called ASCII codes. Lots of radio acronyms mapped across, like O & O meaning over and out. TTFN is actually ta-ta for now, and was stolen from a British wartime radio comedy show.

EOM, EOL, EOF and all those symbols came from that era. EOM (End of Message) is a throw-back to Teletype days. E-mail systems were slow. Typically they would display the message headers in a list – each which would take a minute or longer to print out (just the header now before you get to the text) There was a big incentive NOT to print out the body of the message, and so folks tried to get lots into the title, and then as a courtesy added “EOM,” so you didn’t have to waste time and paper printing out an empty message. EOL and EOF are obviously “end of letter” and “end of fax”.

Often messages were crammed together with as many characters on a line as possible to save paper. This made it hard to figure where one paragraph ended, and another began, so folks would punctuate with “//” which made it easier to speed read through the otherwise Proust-like black rectangles of text. Many people still often sign their messages // (Name).

The people who started e-mail were computer scientists. Most of these people early on never learned to type, and they made lots of typos, and were slow. So out of sheer laziness (and the fact that Computer Science has lots of acronyms) they started using abbreviated forms of common phrases. OBH! “Oh bloody hell!” is one that has fortunately fallen into disuse. Things moved from the formal world of wireless telegraphy to the irreverent world of computer science research, and weird social things started to happen.

## **E-mail – Informal of Formal**

The problem with e-mail is that it is a completely different form of communication. Most of us are very informal, and dash off a message without bothering to read it wearing the recipient’s ears. As a result it is sometimes easy to misunderstand the emotional circumstances under which the message was sent, and it is easy to give and take offense. Slowly a bunch of “emoticons” emerged. A lot of folks don’t know how to parse emoticons, but as you know it’s real easy for the simple ones - just slant your head to the left and try to make a face out of the characters - :-)) is a smiley face, and :-o is surprise, and <:-/ is “I am being a cone head”. These simply give readers a cue as to how your otherwise ambiguous message should be interpreted.

Nowadays most of these things have become a form of one-upmanship, and laziness. Folks use obscure acronyms, OMTU (or make them up) so that you have to ask what they mean, and allow them to assert their intellectual prowess. In the 70’s NASA added to the mystique by adding some semblance of rocket-science to the whole issue by inventing weird acronyms for things that were already easy to say, such as EVA, or extra-vehicular activity, which was ‘short’ for moonwalk.

There is a great story about Al Bean (a moon walker) who took the first color video camera to the moon. Within a few seconds of arrival he had pointed it directly at the sun (no clouds remember) and burned it out. He tried a number of things to fix it, with no result. Finally mission control suggested he use his LIG to give it a strategic tap. Not understanding that this was shorthand for lunar-impulse-generator (or tiny hammer as we mere mortals call them), he kicked it with his astronautical leg, and smashed it completely.

Enough of that... but the history and background are fascinating.

## **Why E-mail?**

Our next quest is to briefly look at the obvious reasons for doing all you can to make e-mail work as an optimal business accessory. First of all, e-mail is just plain practical.

It makes communication more practical and is a huge factor between business relations and inner workings. If you need a report sent to a co-worker half a continent away (or on the other end of the work-place), using e-mail makes this practical and allows it to be done within seconds as opposed to 15 minutes and days.

E-mail is fiscally right. Every business has its eye on the dollar, focused on more money and more ways to save it. E-mail is great at reducing paper usage; it eliminates postage and the manpower hours involved in creating the document that takes a regular postage stamp. And again, it is faster. Time is money.

E-mail reduces the workload on employees in many ways; it is easier to send a page to another co-worker by e-mailing it to them instead of printing the page out and walking over to the co-worker. It also would be easier to e-mail a book instead of printing it out, organizing the pages, forming the book and sending it off when an e-mail can send the book in seconds. You can think of twenty other examples.

E-mail saves time. It can take days for a piece of paper to arrive at a destination through conventional mail. An e-mail can send the same message to the same destination in seconds, and, again, the postage is free.

E-mail is not only practical but it is highly useful, too. E-mail can be used to send Pictures, Files, Documents, Applications and other things. And attaching these items to an e-mail is much easier than attaching them to a letter that you are sending through the mail.

E-mail is reliable. Each e-mail account is a private domain for the user to use what he or she chooses to use within the domain. An E-mail account will never break down. While the mail service might be halted because of bad weather or a strike, an e-mail account will never stop because it wants to.

E-mail creates prestige, fame and reputation. All successful businesses have a business e-mail with their own name within the e-mail, for example Iris@valuebusinessproducts.com. With continued use of a company e-mail, people will recognize the Value Business Products' address and as the business grows, consumers will grow familiar with Value Business Products name and word of mouth will spread. The Value Business Products moniker within the e-mail becomes an automatic advertisement as well.

And so it goes. Let's now look at what I will loosely define as the "rules" around e-mail.

## The Rules of E-mail

### 1. Why is it no surprise that Rule No 1 is 'Reply promptly to all e-mail'

Not returning e-mail is like putting someone on hold on the telephone and forgetting him or her. Imagine if you call someone on the phone; that person says please hold, and never comes back. You would be mildly inconvenienced or strongly irritated to say the least. Not returning e-mail promptly gets the same response. Even if you are on your TREO or Blackberry, and you message back a short acknowledgement, "Received and understood, more later or more when I have a full keyboard.

Research shows that it takes **seven contacts, on average, to set up a meeting**, especially if there are several people involved. It is almost impossible to do this by phone. And when you or I do not return a scheduling e-mail promptly, we throw a monkey wrench into the situation. There are software packages emerging now with automated calendaring, etc. to take care of this. iPolipo is one such product. Microsoft's e-mail products have a calendar function that allows you to e-mail

an invitation to meeting participants and it carries one-click options to accept, decline or accept tentatively, and this can shorten the process considerably.

2. **Courtesy and tone** are VERY important – This may actually be the most important rule around e-mail. Remember we talked early on about e-mail having no emotion and the problem with the recipient misunderstanding it, or worse, taking it the wrong way. This happens on a regular basis. For instance my Colorado cowboy friend who took me horseback riding over Thanksgiving, says he feels an e-mail directed his way done in all Capital letters comes across as forceful, maybe even mild irritation.
3. **Mirror the recipient** - formality vs. informality. Mirror across the board. If the writer gives you two words with no greeting, note this before writing back three full paragraphs. I personally believe in business that we should err on the side of formality, so if in question, I am always more formal. However, some lawyers have suggested that if they start writing long e-mails that are formally formatted, their clients will think they are unnecessarily using billable hours. In other words, the client resents paying for formality in e-mail. I have also been told that if one does create a formal e-mail, it is expected that the spelling is perfect, etc. It takes time to review and make sure everything is right. And informal e-mail, on the other hand, can have a spelling or punctuation error that is acceptable.
4. Proper **thoughtfulness on copying** – when you copy others, make sure it is necessary. People do not want the clutter in their e-mail. Remember, e-mail is for fast and quick and easy business communication. E-mail is often overused, and it is smart to make sure you are not the perpetrator.
5. It is okay to copy lots and lots of people on an e-mail, but unless you have everyone's concurrence that it is ALSO okay to share their e-mail with others, please **blind copy** so that my e-mail address does not go out to 50 other people.
6. **Proper thoughtfulness on blind copying** – this is tricky. Basically try not to use it. In some ways, it can be perceived as if you are 'going behind someone's back.'
7. **Consideration of recipient's time** is one of the biggest issues around e-mail. At all costs, avoid writing a novel in business e-mail and consider other courtesies, like bullet point numeration of issues making a lengthy e-mail easier to read. Bottom line, lengthy prose can be trying during a busy day.
8. **Signature File** – E-mail is a form of personal and business branding, just like your business card. I believe that a complete signature should be under every e-mail sent for business, unless there is a clear reason for it not to be there. Notice I said complete signature file. This contains all your information including name, name of business, e-mail address, URL, mailing address and if different, physical location.
9. **Forwarding** – Most e-mail is meant for you, the recipient, only. Be certain and have a specific purpose before forwarding the e-mail of others.
10. Request a reply and/or copy the **e-mail back to yourself** to make sure that your e-mail does not get lost in the clutter; in other words, figure out a following or tracking system.
11. **Attachments** – Protocol. Be sure to mention the attachment in the body of your e-mail message and tell the recipient if it is in Word, a pdf file, a power point file, etc. If it is some exotic program, be sure to alert the receiver to this, and also suggest that you can send it in another format if necessary. Sometimes, when you are sending to very busy people or to those who primarily use PDA systems during the day, you might want to attach and also cut and paste what you are sending into the body of the e-mail.

12. **PDF files** are safer than other documents, because to most of us, they cannot be altered or copied.

And finally, remember this above all else. The good and bad news about e-mail is that it is instantaneous and that it lasts forever. **Be careful**, very careful, what you say in e-mail, and don't forget the media you are using. It is probably not a good idea to be personal considering that 6.5 billion people can conceivably see what you send. Our not much admired public figure, Mark Foley, knows the reality of what I am saying.

Of course, the good news is that all of this provides a documentation trail that can prove quite useful in business and always when you are on the right side of ethics and the law.



### About PeraConnect

The PeraConnect Personal Career Development programs emerged in 1988 when founder, Sally Pera, became committed to the concept of career self-reliance. Today PeraConnect offers a suite of services for high level executives and aspiring professionals. These include career building skills and personal career building services, incorporating ongoing consulting, introductions and business development outreach.

Sally is the founder of Pocket Coupon Directory of Northern California, a direct mail marketing company named by both the San Francisco Business Times and San Jose Business Journal as one of the Bay Area's fastest-growing companies. Sally also successfully owned and sold three prior businesses, including two national franchise distributorships, and was the top national sales producer for a franchised health industry distributor.

A tireless community leader, advocate and fundraiser, Sally spearheaded an effort to provide the first-ever classroom computers for the San Carlos School System. She currently serves on the board of the Association for Corporate Growth Silicon Valley and is a former board member of the Capital Club, Silicon Valley Association for Start Up Entrepreneurs (SVASE), San Jose Business Forum, and the Silicon Valley Charity Ball Foundation. She is also a member of VISTAGE International, a professional organization for executives, and on the Advisory Board of PACE. Sally is past president of the Silicon Valley Chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners, past president of the Peninsula Executives Association, and a former board member of Hospice of the Valley.

She attended Antioch College and Northwestern University's Debate and Public Speaking Institute. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from Colorado College and a Master's degree in Public Administration from the University of Colorado.