

12 CRITICAL STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE EMAIL COMMUNICATION

by
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12 Critical Strategies for Effective Email Communications
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Thanks to the whole Customer Paradigm team for helping me hone these strategies into working principles.

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INTRODUCTION

Most people do not send effective email messages. I know. I spend a lot of time analyzing email messages for our clients, and measuring and tracking their

effectiveness.

Whether you send large email newsletters or just use email to communicate with friends, colleagues and customers, following these twelve strategies will make your email more effective.

So, here's my list, compiled and crafted from years of experience and quantitative analysis of tens of millions of messages we've sent out for our clients:

RULE # 1: ONE MAIN MESSAGE PER EMAIL

The most effective email messages have one main idea or concept. I spent a summer as an intern at the White House, helping to read and answer the mail. The writing staff taught that the strongest messages were ones that didn't distract people with extraneous information.

I'm sure you've received a message from someone that has eleven different ideas and thoughts that ramble from paragraph to paragraph.

So if you're like most people (myself included), you'll just leave this complicated message for later, and focus on another email or task that's much easier to accomplish.

Before you start writing a message, write down what you're trying to communicate. Or at least think about your message before you start writing.

The most effective messages are ones that are crisp, clear and concise.

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RULE # 2: KEEP IT SHORT

If you're like me, the phone rings off the hook, people walk over to your desk to ask you a question, and other people are instant messaging you. And then your cell phone starts ringing. It's enough to make anyone a bit crazy and give you Attention Deficit Disorder.

Our collective attention spans are very short. People simply have too many

distractions to wade through a really long email. You might think they need all of the information.

But when people are faced with dense blocks of text, many people's eyes glaze over. And then they ignore the entire message.

And thus, the most effective email messages are short. Two or three short sentences in length. Perhaps a couple of bullet points. And perhaps the short message is followed by supporting material, an attachment or a link to more information on a website.

Enough said. I'll try to keep this section short.

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RULE # 3: KEEP IT RELEVANT

I believe that attention is the most important asset of any business or organization. What do I mean by this? If your messages are relevant, your recipients will pay attention to what you are trying to say.

If your messaging is not relevant, however, you're quickly going to find that your messages are filed in the "I'll get to these later" pile.

If you send email that isn't relevant – they will quickly stop paying attention to your messages.

It's easy to get into a mentality where you want to send everything to everyone. And with email newsletters or mass broadcasts, it's not that expensive to do. However, once someone feels your messages aren't that important, they will simply stop reading them.

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RULE # 4: REPLY EARLY & REPLY OFTEN

With the huge volume of spam, it's tough to know if your message got through. Right now, four out of every five emails sent over the Internet today is spam. With so much junk, it's easy for your message to get lost, trapped in a

junk mail filter, or simply piled up in someone's ever-expanding inbox.

So you start to worry when you haven't heard back from someone that you emailed a couple of days ago. Hmmmm, you say. Did that person get my message? Should I send it again? If I do, will that bug them? Am I being too pushy?

So when you're on the other side of the email message, it's really important to reply early and reply often.

What you're doing is letting them know you (a) received the message and (b) that you care. Even if you're not able to take action on their message right away, replying back with a quick message indicates that you're not ignoring them.

Replying early to a message could be as basic as something like this:

Bob-

Thanks for sending this over. I'll work on this later today.

Thanks,

Jeff

We've found that replying early and often dissipates a lot of anxiety and tension, and allows the person who sent you a message to know that they don't have to worry about it.

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RULE # 5: FROM LINE

The single most important part of an email message is the From line. If the person you're sending to doesn't recognize your name, your message will be at best skipped over. At worst, it will be simply deleted without opening.

Most email programs show a friendly display name instead of the plain email address.

The From line of your email (friendly display name) should have your full name and organization in it.

For example, when I send out an email, my from line reads: Jeff Finkelstein - Customer Paradigm. When someone receives an email from me, it's pretty clear which person named Jeff the message came from. And if they don't know me, but know my company instead, they won't completely ignore my message.

But at least a couple of times per week I get an email that was meant for someone else named Jeff, but works at a different company.

The culprit is that many people have only their first names listed in the friendly From display line. Most of the time the messages aren't too racy, but with email programs that automatically fill in an email address when you start to type a first name, it's easy to email the wrong person something that could be seriously career limiting.

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RULE # 6: SUBJECT LINE

After the From line, the subject line is the second most important part of an effective email. If you forget to include a subject line, your message is much more likely to go into a junk mail folder, or just not be opened.

Email marketing professionals live and die by subject lines. A good subject line will sum up what the message is all about, but still entice someone to open the message, read it, and take action.

Personalizing a subject line with your company's name or the recipient's name or other information can also lead to higher message open rates.

Including the company name in the subject line can increase open rates by up to 32 percent to 60 percent over a subject line without branding. (Jupiter Research)

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RULE # 7: PERSONALIZE EACH MESSAGE

Except when being called into the principal's office, everyone likes being called by their name. In this impersonal world of email messages, people like to know that you know who they are, and that you care about them as a person.

Nothing is worse than a highly demanding email that is sent without being addressed to someone by name and is out of context. A message that starts: "Can you make these changes ASAP?" puts you on the defensive right way. You might think: Why should I care if they are in a hurry?

It's so much nicer to have a message that begins with: "Jeff - I hope you're doing well. I just found out that we're going to be mentioned on the front page of The Wall Street Journal tomorrow. Can you make these changes ASAP?"

Wow. I'm much more willing to help someone who personalizes the message to me, and gives me a non-threatening reason why this needs to really be done by tomorrow.

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RULE # 8: ALWAYS INCLUDE YOUR CONTACT INFORMATION

I can't tell you how many times I've not returned a call promptly because I didn't have someone's contact information readily available.

I'm sure you've had the same experience. Someone emails you to please call them. But they didn't give you a phone number, and there isn't one listed in their signature line. You then have to dig through past emails, look in your address book, Google them, and still you aren't able to find their direct line.

In this age of iPhones, Blackberries and cellphones, it's rare that I have a phone number memorized.

I know this is a simple and basic thing. But so many people don't follow it. If you want someone to respond to you, you've got to make it as easy as possible for them. Same thing goes for leaving a voice mail.

So many people rush through their phone number, making it virtually impossible to write down the number without having to go back and listen to their message a couple of extra times. Ideally, you should always give your phone number, say it slowly, and repeat it twice so that someone can write it down and then make sure it's correct.

Effective emails always include a signature line with contact information. You should include your contact information in every new message or every message you reply to.

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RULE # 9: STRONG CALL TO ACTION

In direct marketing or email correspondence, most of the time you want someone to take a specific action when they receive your message. You might want to set up an in-person meeting, or have them click through to a website to read more. Or respond back and say, "Yes, let's go ahead with the project."

The most effective email messages always have a strong call to action, telling the recipient what you want them to do.

I'm sure you've received long, rambling emails from people. And by the time you get to the end, you don't really know what you're supposed to do (if anything). Is this a message that is just nice to read and have for future reference? Or do they want me to actually do something?

Email is a low context medium. It doesn't transmit behavioral clues like voice inflection that might otherwise indicate what you want a person to do. So it's important to be direct and ask what you want the other person to do. It sounds basic, but it's a key to effective email.

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RULE # 10: PASTE LINKS & GET ON THE SAME PAGE

How many times have you felt that the person receiving your email just isn't on the same page as you? A lot of times it's literally true. You might be thinking that they are looking at one page on a website, when in fact they are

looking at something completely different. I know I've been frustrated by this in the past.

Simple pasting a link into an email is the best strategy. Again, it seems simple, but it can mean the difference between confusion and clarity.

It's also easy to do, and takes very little time. In your browser, simply copy the website address (i.e. www.CustomerParadigm.com) and paste it into the body of the email message. On a PC, the Control-C shortcut will copy; the Control-V will paste.

Sending someone the exact link to the website page you are discussing gets everyone on the same page.

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RULE # 11: USE FOLDERS & FILTERS

If you're like me and you receive a lot of email, you can use folders to store messages from different people or clients.

In most email programs, you can set up automatic rules (often called filters) that will place all messages from Joe into a specific folder.

That way you can review all of the messages Joe sends over to you, reply to the ones that need attention, and not have to spend the time moving the messages from the inbox to another folder when you're finished. All of the messages addressed to info@customerparadigm.com, for example, go to a different folder that I don't check as often, because people who send to that address are usually trying to sell me something.

This one strategy has made me amazingly more efficient at dealing with the large volume of email I receive each day (usually about 950 messages per day).

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RULE # 12: KNOW WHEN EMAIL DOESN'T WORK

Pick up the phone instead...

Email remains one of the primary ways that businesses communicate internally among their staff, and externally with their customers, suppliers and other stakeholders.

However, make sure you recognize when email is losing its effectiveness. It's easy to hide behind email when we don't want to speak to a scary client or team member. I've been guilty of that as well when I have a million things going on. But sometimes a three minute conversation can clear up the confusion inherent in five days of back-and-forth email messages.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff Finkelstein is the founder of Boulder-based, Customer Paradigm, an interactive marketing firm that has helped clients achieve top rankings through search engine optimization and web marketing. Finkelstein is an adjunct professor for Colorado State University, and has lead workshops around the country teaching companies how to better optimize their websites and get found. Finkelstein has written syndicated columns on web marketing, and reaches tens of thousands of people each week through Customer Paradigm's eLearning Series newsletter.

Finkelstein also helps his wife, Rabbi Jamie Korngold, run the Adventure Rabbi program. Through search engine optimization, reporters from Good Morning America, The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, CBS News and Ski Magazine found out about the organization and ran articles and TV segments. This intense media interest sparked a book offer from Doubleday Religion, who published Rabbi Korngold's best-selling book, God in the Wilderness, in April 2008.

Finkelstein has been featured in The New York Times as a Web Guru, and

his company has received numerous awards, including the prestigious 2008 Rocky Mountain Direct Marketing Association Supplier of the Year Award.

Finkelstein lives in Boulder, Colorado with his wife and two daughters.