Email Standards
Some best practices to follow in the digital age

by: Robert C. Goldberg, BTA General Counsel

It was not long ago that two people could have a heated telephone conversation and one of the participants would slam the phone down in anger. Hostile words may have been spoken. Threats may have been made. And all of it would have been spiced with profane language. But there was no record of the call — just bad feelings. In the digital age, that has all changed. Every electronic communication you send is retrievable and, in litigation, will be demanded. Emails need to reflect your professional standards.

Mistakes in sending emails are common. Clicking "Reply all" when an observation was meant for only one individual may occur. Failing to proofread the content of a message and subsequently finding errors or autocorrect changes that were not intended may prove embarrassing. Always remember that emails do not conclude with a smile or a glare, and can be easily misinterpreted.

Emails are notorious for not conveying the intended tone. Studies indicate the four most passive-aggressive phrases to begin an email with are:

- "Per our last conversation"
- "As per my last email"
- "Friendly reminder"
- "Thanks in advance"

Strong responses are best sent when reviewed again the next day. Simply writing the message may be sufficient to dissipate your anger or desire to vent.

Prior to sending an email, determine if it is, in fact, the best way to communicate a message. A phone call, letter or in-person meeting may be more appropriate. Most individuals review their received emails from the bottom up. Prior to responding, make certain you have seen the complete chain of communication on the subject.

The subject line of an email should clearly state the content and purpose of the message. It should summarize the email and indicate the urgency of the message. Designating a message as "High Priority" may separate your email from others, however, do not overuse this designation, as it will become meaningless. The subject line's content will also assist in searching for the email in the future.

When responding to an email, often the gender or pronoun preference of the recipient is unclear. This may be overcome by addressing your email to "Dealer," "Service Manager," "Accounting" or some other generic alternative.

Before sending your email, read it as if you were receiving it cold. Check to see if there are any ambiguities or the content may be misconstrued. Avoid acronyms and abbreviations. Abbreviations are not widely used or understood among different generations (LOL).

In your message, get to the point quickly. A lengthy email in a long list of unread messages may be deferred for when more time is available. Place your action item or question first and then explain. Do not draft six paragraphs and leave your action item at the end.

If you are sending an email with an attachment, ensure that it is necessary and you are sending the correct file. How many times have you clicked "Send" without attaching a document you meant to include? A best practice is to attach the document prior to creating the content of the message. A reference to the attachment in the body of the message also helps the reader know that it may be opened without concern. If you are sending a secure document as an attachment, send the password in a separate communication.

Many messages are generated from Listservs. Do not "Reply all" to a Listserv. Review the distribution list and if it is a general message with only you designated as the recipient, assume it is from a Listserv and reply only to the sender.

Finally, remember that electronic messages are nearly permanent. Write as if either your mom or a judge is reading them. ■

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