

Using E-mail to Negotiate

By BNET Editorial

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It's not unusual to conduct negotiations via e-mail. It's fast, convenient, reliable—and global, so we can conduct almost all preliminary discussions without spending time and money on travel. We're no longer captive to time zone differences or long waiting periods before connecting with the right person.

We do, however, face new challenges when we can't rely on the subtleties of face-to-face communication. Email eliminates tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions. While it's easy to be misunderstood in either environment, it takes more time to rectify misunderstandings that are conveyed through e-mail. In fact, sometimes, we're not aware that there's been a misunderstanding until it's too late. If you're careful with the emails you send, your e-correspondence should be as effective as face-to-face communication.

What You Need to Know

How should I handle poorly-written e-mails from the other negotiator?

In every communication, you should maintain high professional standards and be respectful. Everything you send should be clearly written, edited, and spell-checked. If you receive sub-standard e-mails from those you are negotiating with, you should ask for clarification or agree on a suitable time to call him or her to discuss your questions.

How should rude or angry messages be handled?

Some people will be difficult to deal with whether in person or via e-mail. If a person is consistently difficult, you may need to discuss the issue with that individual in person. Whatever you do, remain in control. Don't stoop to their level, that will only escalate the situation. Instead, clearly, but politely, inform the other person that rudeness is unacceptable. Rude e-mail exchanges too easily deteriorate into "flaming," a netiquette term for using abusive language. Communicating like this is very hard to recover from and negotiations will usually break off.

How can I use emphatic language that is believable?

First, don't use exclamation points, underlining, or capital letters. Those are emotional indicators rather than supportive, convincing enthusiasm. Besides, it looks unprofessional and may confuse your correspondent. Craft your message carefully and show through your conviction about product or service or competitive advantages that you strongly believe in your position. The message will speak for itself. If absolutely necessary, however, to set some ideas apart, use italics or bold—sparingly.

What to Do

Remember the Fundamentals

No matter what media you use to conduct your negotiations, the underlying principles do not change. Essentially, negotiation is a process that helps two or more parties agree on meeting their respective objectives.

Before, and while negotiating:

- *Be well prepared.* Make sure you have your facts at hand and be thoroughly conversant in the communications between you and the other side. If you meet face-to-face for the final round, have all relevant correspondence handy in case you need to refer to it.
- *Be clear about your objectives.* Know exactly what you want, but also know what you will be ready to accept as a secondary position. Also be clear about your last ditch fallback position—the absolute minimum you are willing to accept.
- *Communicate clearly and be sure you understand the other side.* Be accurate about your position. Leave no room for confusion. If you do not know exactly what the other person wants, or if he or she is being vague, using words like “approximately” or “around,” ask for precise clarification.
- *Have options and be ready to use them.* You have various scenarios in mind so, if you expect others to compromise, be flexible yourself. But always remember the *Golden Rule of Negotiations*: always be prepared to walk away whether in real time or in virtual space.
- *Recap.* Periodically summarize what you both agree to, especially in lengthy negotiations.

Create an Initial Offer

Begin the process by understanding your needs and composing an inquiry to the other party regarding what you want. Your initial contact should include:

- what you want from the other party

- what discounts and terms are available
- a time frame for a basic agreement and fulfillment
- any non-negotiable aspects of your inquiry

Make the offer letter (e-mail) clear. Highlight specific desires and or expectations. Use bullet points liberally to set aside each item in your initial offer and suggest a date for a reply if your needs are time sensitive. Some people prefer to respond to the vendor's initial offer, others prefer to start. You need to determine the value of what you are buying and know the competitive arena to understand what is reasonable.

Organize Your Correspondence

Depending on your needs and the extent of the particular negotiation, an e-mail may be all that is needed to begin the process. If it is a complex situation that may involve many customized features or special treatment, other people may need to be involved and the process will soon become more complex.

If this happens, you need to manage the correspondence well to keep negotiations on track. For example, here's how a single customer complaint may wend its way through an organization:

- An e-mail arrives from a customer with a complaint.
- You acknowledge the complaint and either give an explanation or an apology. You may suggest that the matter is under further investigation.
- If you are investigating further, tell the customer when she or he should expect an update.
- When you do update the customer suggest a solution. This is your initial offer in this particular negotiation.
- The customer may be satisfied and the negotiations end. But the customer may make a counter offer.
- The solution may require the input or approval of additional people in your organization. If so, the negotiation quickly becomes complicated.

All e-mails (or other correspondence) need to be organized in a way that supports your needs throughout the negotiation. Your primary need is to know exactly where the matter stands, who is involved, what has been offered, what is wanted, and what next steps are going to be taken and when. If all correspondence between all parties develops from a single "thread," remember that in a few rounds the e-mail becomes unwieldy. So, only include relevant previous messages in any response but be sure you know where to find what you need from the growing file.

Stay Calm

Reasonable people disagree. It isn't unusual for people looking at the same situation to make entirely different conclusions. So be patient. The discussions may take longer than planned. Circumstances change. Misunderstandings might lead to acrimonious communications. Remain calm. Do not respond immediately to any change in temper or to what may appear to be unreasonable demands. This will give you time to cool down and also to re-read what was actually sent to you: in the heat of the moment, you may have misread the message.

Always be polite, particularly during negotiations. Assume good will and that a solution exists. Don't be afraid to ask for clarification. It is also possible that something you said put off the other party. A protracted correspondence over a misunderstanding could jeopardize everything and waste a lot of time. Remember to think win-win; everyone wants to be satisfied after the interaction.

Project the Right Tone

We know that e-mail negotiations can fail because the correspondents don't have all the same clues they would normally have in face-to-face or even telephone conversations because they can't see body language or hear one's tone of voice. When negotiating by e-mail, think just as carefully about *how you say what you say*. Because misunderstanding is easier due to the absence of additional clues and the lack of immediacy, your written tone is the only way to convey goodwill and your desire to help the other party get what they need to.

In a particularly sensitive negotiation, write a draft of your correspondence and let it sit for a while before sending it. Return to it later and be sure that the tone is consistent with your words. Be sure not to use judgments, name-calling or attributions. Try to avoid words such as "petty," "trivial," "quibbling," and "stalling," even if you think they are accurate.

Recap and Close

When you have reached an agreement, recap your understanding of the terms. Everyone should agree to the same summation. Then move to close the negotiations and begin fulfilling the terms you have agreed upon. Write up and distribute a formal summary as soon as you can after the final session—even *at* the final session—so that no one changes their mind, forgets what happened or regrets the outcome.

What to Avoid

You're Impatient

When negotiating by e-mail, be patient. Be sure your messages are completely clear, polite, and spell-checked. If it is particularly sensitive message, give yourself some distance between first draft and sending it so you can be sure the message is exactly the one you want to send. Check for the tone, too, and be sure there is no room for misunderstanding. If it is a critical message have someone else read it for possible misinterpretations.

You Send a Hasty E-mail

If you send an e-mail you regret, immediately make amends; possibly by telephone. Re-establish a co-operative working relationship. It helps to recap your agreements and understandings. This may remind the other party that you are reasonable and committed to the process.

Where to Learn More

Books:

Chan, Janis Fisher, E-Mail: How to Write and Manage E-Mail in the Workplace, Write it Well, 2005.

Steele, Jeffrey, Email: The Manual: Everything You Should Know About Email Etiquette, Policies and Legal Liability Before You Hit Send. Marion Street Press, 2006.