



Ten Ways to Avoid Email Hangovers and Headaches

Studies show that more than half of all emails are misunderstood. When people are asked if they understand an email they reply with a 90% certainty that yes, they do understand. When I first saw these statistics I could not conceive of this being possible. However, in my marketing consulting practice, examples of email issues in business kept coming to my attention. Some call it “death by email”. Some refer to “email blunders”. But whatever you call email miscommunication it can result in confusion, embarrassment, wasted time, lost opportunities, and in the worst case scenario – legal action.

Here are ten ways to avoid email hangovers and headaches:

1. Take time to consider whether email is the best vehicle for the message you want to communicate. If a message includes emotion or complex issues, email is not the proper vehicle. You are setting yourself up to be misunderstood. In email we do not have tone of voice, facial expression, eye contact, or body language to help someone discern accurately the meaning of our words. Rule of thumb: If the information can't be communicated in clear short sentences or bullet points, then email is probably not the communications tool you should use.
2. Make sure the person receiving the email understands the context that surrounds the email. If there has been a thread of conversation, keep it intact so you minimize the possibility of misunderstandings.
3. Avoid adding new people to the subject line in the middle of an email communication thread if at all possible. It has the same awkward feeling as someone walking up and interrupting two people who are in the middle of a conversation.
4. Avoid slang, catch phrases and jargon. This is another common source of confusion.
5. Be careful with humor. While humor is a powerful communications tool, care must be exercised in email to ensure that you avoid offending others.
6. Do not use the email address of others in a mailing to numerous recipients without a clear indicator of consent. (Certainly, if a group of people work in the same office, there is implied consent because you have easy access to the person's email address, but if you add vendors, or people from other companies, etc. it can be an entirely different matter.) A person's email address is their personal property and should not be handed out to others carelessly.

7. Make the subject line clear and pertinent to the message. An effective subject line helps ensure that your email gets opened.
8. People scan emails. Put the most important information first. Otherwise, you can easily start a chain of misunderstanding. You assume the recipient read the whole email. The recipient only read part of the email. The recipient assumes you are sending something else. The perfect beginning of an email headache...
9. Remember, an email is a legal document. You only have to peruse the headlines of recent court cases to see how often an email that never should have been written has become crucial evidence in a serious legal action. Words in cyberspace have a very long life. Choose your words wisely. Choose your communications vehicles carefully.
10. When email communication breaks down, pick up the phone and try to straighten the matter out before it snowballs into something more difficult to resolve. I once worked with a client who had an email disaster that started with a one word reply to an email. The reply was, "Sure." The recipient interpreted the reply as sarcastic. There was a huge email hangover associated with this misunderstanding.

Years ago I made the mistake of replying to an email that had been forwarded to me. Obviously, the email reply went to the original sender of the email and not to the person who forwarded it to me. The result was an intensely embarrassing moment that is brought up at least once a year and yes, there is lots of laughter at my expense. So, to review:

- Decide if email is the best form of communication for your message.
 - Be aware of who you are sending the email to.
 - Be succinct and clear.
 - Choose your words carefully.
 - Finally, take a minute and review the email before you hit "Send"
- If you do these things you can avoid email hangovers and headaches.

Genuine Communications offers a training module in effective email communication. This topic also makes an entertaining and informative talk for your group, or organization.

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