
Global Email Etiquette

By Lothar Katz

- *Use a meaningful subject line.*
- *Only include those recipients in the To field who you expect to respond.*
- *Use Reply to All only when you are certain everyone needs to see your reply.*
- *Answer all questions, and pre-empt further ones.*
- *Use a simple structure & layout, and type in complete sentences.*
- *Do not use abbreviations and emoticons unless you can be certain all recipients are familiar with them.*
- *Do not attach unnecessary files.*
- *Read your draft email before sending it.*
- *Respond promptly, or send a note stating by when to expect your response.*

Email etiquette rules make sense. They help reduce misunderstandings and improve the overall communication. In addition, some of them are also useful for more casual forms of electronic business communication, like Instant Messaging or Twitter.

Everyone around the globe appreciates it if you follow rules such as those listed above. Once you're looking to communicate *across* cultures, though, etiquette rules may become less clear-cut. As always when working across cultural borders, different expectations of relationships, respect, politeness, etc. must be accommodated. Expectations of proper email styles therefore vary across countries and cultures in expected format, degree of formality, conciseness, personal tone, etc. Keep in mind that the objective of your communication is not merely to be *efficient*, which in this context means short and to the point, but also to be *effective*: in order to strengthen relationships and nurture a spirit of collaboration, it needs to send messages of respect, consideration and commitment to the people with whom you are communicating.

So while the above list mostly focuses on *efficiency*, here are a few global email etiquette suggestions that could make you more *effective*, even though some of them may seem less intuitive:

- *Start your emails with a courteous greeting, anything from "Dear Ms. XX" to "Hi XX". Don't omit the greeting, use a name alone, or misspell a name, as all of these might be viewed as offensive by some recipients.*
- *Consider diverse naming conventions. US-Americans and select others usually give their names in the order of first-last. Some in Europe and Latin America use last-first, as do many Asians. Chinese names are commonly given last-first if a person uses their Chinese name, first-last if they adopted an English first name. Country-specific information about these conventions is available at www.executiveplanet.com, for example.*

- *Use first names only if you and the recipient previously established this. Members of most cultures consider it inappropriate if you force them to move to first names, which they might otherwise do with close friends only.*
- *Unless your recipients are US-Americans, who commonly prefer getting straight to the point, start with some "small talk." This is particularly helpful when communicating with members of strongly relationship-oriented cultures, among them most Latin Americans and Asians. For example, tell them how your weekend was and ask about theirs. Alternatively, close with a similar statement or maybe something like "Hope you'll have a great Easter break!" Doing so almost always helps in building stronger bonds and motivating others to collaborate with you.*
- *Do not write in CAPITALS, which some take as the equivalent of yelling, or mark your text in bright colors, to which several cultures attribute special meanings.*
- *Carefully consider which level of formality would be most appropriate. This can be hard, as individual familiarity, cultural preferences, hierarchical differences, and a number of other factors all impact what is considered "right." If in doubt: too much is better than too little.*
- *Always end your emails with "Thank you," "Sincerely," "Best regards," "Talk to you soon," "Cheers" - something that sounds friendly and positive.*
- *Do not sign emails with your first name only, unless you are already on first-name basis with the person(s) you are sending them to.*

BTW, err, by the way: almost all of these global email etiquette practices might actually improve your domestic email communication, too. Give them a try!

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A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, Lothar regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. He teaches International Project and Risk Management at the University of Texas at Dallas' School of Management and is a Business Leadership Center Instructor at the Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business.
