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Sending E-ffective E-mails

Getting the most from E-mail

E-mail was the original “Killer App,” it was the application that led many people to buy their first PC and to link into the internet. No technology in history has gained acceptance as quickly as e-mail. More than one billion e-mail users send out over two million e-mails every second of every day. Checking e-mail is as much a part of daily life today as brushing our teeth or combing our hair. It is hard to imagine doing business today without using e-mail. Sales people put a lot of time and effort into developing their face to face presentation skills but give little thought to their electronic communications. Here are some things to think about before you click “SEND”.

The same qualities that make e-mail so valuable, the ease and speed of using electronic communication, also presents some challenges. The ability to send out e-mail messages to large numbers of computer users at virtually no cost gave birth to spam. Symantec estimates that well over 80% of all e-mails are spam. In addition to spam, all e-mail users receive a large number of messages of low value from their contacts. These range from the endless stream of offers or “newsletters” from legitimate online businesses to the cute pictures of dancing kittens sent to you by your aunt. Even if we wanted to read all of the messages jamming our inboxes, there are not enough hours in the day to do so. This makes the “delete” button the most popular spot on the keyboard. Some experts have estimated that dealing with these time-wasting messages costs American business over \$640 billion per year. Piercing this wall of clutter is a real challenge for a sales person.

My dad used to say, “Be sure your brain is in gear before your mouth is set in motion,” this is even truer with e-mail. If we are speaking to someone face-to-face or even on the telephone we are constantly receiving feedback on the impact of our words. We can tell from the other person’s reaction when we’ve confused them or offended them in some way. This allows us to clear up the misunderstanding before we move on. E-mail offers us no immediate feedback loop, so we do not have the luxury of correcting ourselves during the conversation.

Like diamonds, e-mails are forever. Never write an e-mail when you are angry or upset. E-mails document and archive exactly what you say at a particular moment in time. Once sent, you have no control over where your message is sent and who will read it. Anyone who reads the news of business and political scandals should have a sense of this. It is critical that you make yourself perfectly clear when communicating through e-mail.

Getting your e-mails read – the subject line

Reading their e-mail is not a task most people enjoy. They want to quickly wade through their messages and move on with their life. They open their inbox and quickly scan through the list quickly deleting anything that does not interest them or that seems unimportant. The read or delete decision is based solely on the name of the sender and the information in the subject line. If you have a relationship with the recipient, your e-mail address may be enough to get your message read. If you are trying to reach a new prospect the subject line has to convince them to read further.

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The subject line is like the headline in an ad; it should grab the reader's attention and motivate them to read on. Your subject line needs to be focused on the customer and their needs. The subject line should answer the question, "Why should I care?" A subject line such as, "About my company" will have little appeal. The customer will read your message only if they believe it offers some benefit for them. You can offer the reader information, "3 ways to attract new customers" or offer savings, "Reduce your local marketing costs by 35%". People are always interested in what their neighbors are doing. Saying something like, "See what Joe's Restaurant is saying about us," leverages their curiosity to get them to open the e-mail. Ask yourself, "If I was the customer, would I open this message?"

The subject line should accurately describe the content of the message. If the body of the message does not fulfill the promise made in the subject line the customer will feel cheated.

Writing a good subject line is a challenge. You have only a few words to "sell" the value of the message to your target. The subject line is arguably the most important part of your e-mail, if it doesn't convince the reader to look further, nothing else matters. Taking the time to craft a good subject line is well worth your time and effort.

Getting your message across—the body copy

E-mail is a hurry-up media. Because of this, e-mail messages should be simple and concise. Do not attempt to put too much into an e-mail. If you have a number of concepts to communicate, use a series of messages rather than one long e-mail. Use short paragraphs and bullet points to make your message easy to read.

Start off strong; the first sentence should draw the reader into your message. This is always good advice when writing to persuade, but it is doubly so when sending an e-mail. The first few lines of your message may be visible to the reader in the "preview pane" of the program they use to read their e-mail. If the first part of your message intrigues them they will open the message and read further

Your message should be personable but professional. Write like you speak and avoid language that is too formal. Read your message aloud to be sure that it is clear and flows properly. Every message should tell the customer how your product can help them. "My publication has a circulation of 10,000" is much less interesting to them than, "Tell 10,000 potential new customers about your business."

Attachments

Be careful when including attachments with your e-mails. Large attachments may trigger a response from your customer's spam filters and block transmission of your message. If your attachment is a single sheet or just a couple of images, consider including it in the body of the message. This will avoid the spam filter and make it easier for the reader to view your materials. The telephone sales people who work for my company create special sales collateral for upcoming projects that are designed to be placed in an e-mail. This is a quick way to convey the information to customers in

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a consistent and well-written format. They simply place a brief personalized note above the piece and send it, (*“Mr. Customer, I think you will find this interesting, I will call you later to answer any questions you may have. Thanks.”*)

How do you look in Outlook?

Because we send so many e-mails it is easy to take it for granted. E-mail tends to be a casual and informal media with many senders feeling unrestrained by the rules of grammar or spelling. This is acceptable if you are making plans with a friend for the weekend, but not for your business messages. Every contact with a customer, whether in person, in print or via e-mail represents you and your company. If you don't care enough to use proper spelling or grammar in a message to a customer, why should they think you will get their ads right? Take the time to spell-check and proofread your message. Make sure your e-mail signature includes your contact information. Many inside sales people include a photo of themselves in their message to let their customers match a face with their voice. Before you hit send, make sure you have included the promised attachments. You want your e-mails to project a positive image of you and your company.

The limits of e-mail

E-mail is a powerful tool, but it is not a replacement for personal contacts with customers. The best e-mail is a poor substitute for meeting with a customer or at least speaking with them. E-mail is good for conveying information, but building a relationship requires direct contact with a customer on a regular basis. People make buying decisions with their emotions and justify the purchase with the facts. E-mail does not touch a person emotionally. The best use of e-mail is to streamline routine communication to free up your time for substantive relationship building conversations with prospects and customers. People want you to make them feel special—receiving an e-mail is not special. I still like to send out handwritten notes to my business and personal contacts. Because e-mail has supplanted “Snail Mail” for this purpose, my little notes help me to stand out from the crowd. I often get calls thanking me for sending a note and months later I see them pinned to a bulletin board in their office. When was the last time someone thanked you for an e-mail?

Conclusion

As sales people we are professional communicators. To be effective we need to be masters of every form of communication. Carefully choosing our words for the maximum impact means every contact with a customer will advance our cause, no matter how they are delivered.

This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.

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