

## MANAGEMENT

### When e-Mail Doesn't Do the Job

It might be a time-saver, but e-mail is not always the way to go when it comes to effective communication.

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By Cliff Ennico

Has this ever happened to you? You spend a lovely Sunday afternoon watching the fall foliage (or whatever). You check your voice-mail messages every once in a while, but there are none. When you return to your home office, you find five new e-mail messages from an important client, each one marked "urgent." When you call the client, explain that you check your e-mails only once on Sundays, and suggest (gently) that the client leave a voice mail if he has an urgent message, the client chews you out for being unresponsive and tells you to "get with the times; e-mail is the way people communicate these days."

Sadly, as the pace of business gets more and more frantic, many people are using e-mail as a substitute for human interaction. Diane DiResta, president of DiResta Communications Inc. in Staten Island, New York, and author of the book *Knockout Presentations: How to Deliver Your Message with Power, Punch and Pizzazz*, thinks this is a big mistake. "I know people are saying they're cutting back on meetings and conference calls and relying more on e-mail," says DiResta, "but while e-mail is a great tool, it's not the appropriate way to communicate in all situations."

As an example, DiResta tells the story of a close friend who e-mailed her with news that the friend's mother had died. "Because I had recently changed my e-mail address," recalls DiResta, "the message bounced back to her. Fortunately, she saw it, picked up the phone and called me. If she hadn't checked her e-mails that day, or if the message had gotten through and had gotten lost in the 100 or more e-mails I receive every day, I would not have known her mother had died and would have missed the funeral."

So when is e-mail the wrong way to communicate?

- **When you are negotiating a business deal**, because by sending e-mails back and forth with points and counterpoints, you lose a lot of the power of negotiation. For example, says DiResta, if a client e-mails and asks "We think your work is wonderful, but we don't have the budget, so can you do it for half your normal rates?" an e-mail message saying "no" cuts off any further discussion. If you respond by telephone, you give yourself a chance to probe behind the question, listen for tone and innuendos, and suggest possible compromises.
- **When you have a lengthy message to communicate**. "With e-mail, you need to learn to speak in sound bites," advises DiResta, who points out that attention spans are getting shorter all the time. Nobody has the patience to read long diatribes or wordy explanations. If you need more than 50 words to say what you need to say, pick up the phone.
- **When you are delivering bad news**. Never, ever use e-mail to fire an employee, or to announce 1) that your office is relocating to Lower Slobbovia, 2) that holiday bonuses will not be granted this year, or 3) that your rates will be increasing January 1. This may sound like common sense, but I can tell you stories...
- **To confirm appointments**. DiResta points out that most people don't reply to every e-mail message they receive. If you are sending an e-mail to confirm an important appointment or meeting date, always follow up with a telephone call to ensure that the recipient received the message and agrees to the time, date and place.
- **When you are angry or emotional**. It's easy to say something in a quickly dashed-off e-mail that you will regret later. When someone e-mails a message that upsets you, count to 100 and send a short e-mail reply saying "Let's discuss this live tomorrow." This not only buys you a cooling-off period, but also sends a signal that you are not afraid of confronting the sender openly. If it makes you feel better, you can draft an angry reply and save it in your "drafts" folder until you've calmed down. Then erase the "draft," and pick up the phone.

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Get more tips on the do's and don't of e-mail communication in "[e-Mail Etiquette](#)."

Cliff Ennico is host of the PBS television series MoneyHunt and a leading expert on managing growing companies. His advice for small businesses regularly appears on the "Protecting Your Business" channel on the Small Business Television Network at [www.sbtv.com](http://www.sbtv.com). E-mail him at [cennico@legalcareer.com](mailto:cennico@legalcareer.com).

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