

Nightmare at 20,000 emails

If you can't control the messages flooding into your computer, they will surely control you ...

By Deborah Wessell

August 28, 2000

We have created a monster.

Email is infinitely easy to send. One barely has to think, let alone punctuate. Just toss off a missive, hit Send, toss off another. But email is far more blessed to send than to receive. We are drowning in our own inboxes.

One marketing director likens powering up her PC each morning to "sitting down in front of a fire hose blasting email." Another, in despair over her "3,207 items (497 unread)," started shoving email into folders according to the date of receipt. Now he's got chronologically-subdivided-utter-flaming chaos.

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We've all got Inbox Fatigue. So let's evaluate your **outgoing email**. Sure, it's faster and easier not to, but the purpose of communication isn't to save you 7.3 seconds. It's to inform, gain agreement, create action, influence opinion. And since all communication is potentially marcom, the email you write is marketing **you**—as an intelligent, considerate member of the team.

Before you hit Send, give your email a four-point tune-up:

- Is it necessary?
- Is it headlined?
- Is it structured?
- Is it easy on the eyes?

Is it necessary?

Consider the very simple email: I can't make the meeting, I agree, etc. A quick phone call might suffice. For the very complicated—we've got to fire Harry, the CEO's way off base on this one, etc.—"facemail" is the way to go, especially if the topic is confidential, liable to misinterpretation, or would be embarrassing if made public.

If you don't want it replicated, don't email it. And if you're having trouble nailing the right tone of voice, use your voice.

Is it headlined?

Imagine scanning *The New York Times* and seeing these headlines:



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Not too engaging, are they? No guidance to what you'd want to read or why. Certainly not enough to go on if you had 300 articles in front of you and had to find the right one fast. So craft your subject lines like a newspaper headline editor.

Not:

Subject: Staff meeting
Subject: Second quarter results
Subject: ASP vendors

But:

Subject: Important new agenda for staff meeting
Subject: Second quarter results: We rocked!
Subject: Our best ASP choice

And be sure to **change the subject line** in your replies. Picture these in your inbox:

Subject: RE: Direct Mail
Subject: RE: Direct Mail
Subject: RE: Direct Mail
Subject: RE: Direct Mail
Subject: RE: Direct Mail
Subject: RE: Direct Mail
Subject: Three drawbacks to our direct mail plan

Which one would you prefer to read? And which one can you save to a folder and unerringly retrieve later on?

Is it structured?

When you're knocking out an email, you already know the background on the topic, your major points, and what results you want. Your recipient knows nothing except that she's plowed through 45 other emails on 38 other topics and missed lunch. So start with a quick summary to get her up to speed.

Not:

"I think coffee ice cream is the way to go. We've done some research and here are the numbers."

But:

"In last week's meeting on world domination, you asked for innovative approaches. I think controlling the global supply of coffee ice cream would lock us in early. Below are the consumption numbers and a projected budget."

Similarly, end with a clear statement of what's next. "I need a response from you by tomorrow noon" or "So I've invited Ben, Jerry, Hagen and Daaz to our next meeting. Be there." If you leave a question in your recipient's mind, it should be "What did we ever do before we hired you?" It shouldn't be "So what?"

