

20 Rules of Writing Effective Business E-Mails

Developing effective business-to-business (B2B) e-mail marketing messages is significantly different than developing business-to-consumer (B2C) e-mails. That is why, after writing extensively about consumer-oriented e-mails in past columns, I'll now address B2B communications.

As I'm sure you know from your own personal experience, business people who receive e-mail want to know the point as quickly as possible. They don't have time to read through a lot of copy unless something immediately captures their interest. They don't appreciate fluff and spin, just benefits and facts. Keeping this in mind, here are my 20 rules for writing effective business e-mail messages:

1. **Be accurate.** Whatever claims you make, benefits you offer, or statistics you quote, make sure they are true and not inflated. Nothing is worse than starting off a relationship with exaggerated or even false information.
2. **Be brief.** Your job with B2B e-mail is to capture interest, then provide more information if it's wanted. You need to identify the most important benefit to the recipient and sum it up in a short paragraph. Think of it as the 30-second "elevator pitch" in e-mail form.
3. **Be clear.** Most business people are turned off by e-mail messages with bad grammar, misspellings, and/or unintelligible content. If you personally struggle with writing, hiring a professional writer to prepare your messages is a worthwhile investment.
4. **Be genuine.** Forget the hype that works with consumers. The B2B relationship is built on trust. Make sure everything you say conveys you are a genuine, upstanding, honest person running a reputable business.
5. **Speak their language.** Whatever you're going to say, write in words they understand and are comfortable with. Don't write down to them or above their comprehension level. People tend to understand and react better to words they use in everyday conversations.
6. **Put yourself in their shoes.** Try to picture the daily routine of the people you're contacting and reflect that in your writing: "I know you're busy, so I'll get right to the point."
7. **Watch out for a "knowledge gap."** Don't assume recipients have the same knowledge about your product or service you do. After you've captured their interest and have reached the "additional information" stage, try offering a step-by-step walkthrough of whatever you're marketing to help them understand what you're trying to say.
8. **Write business e-mails as letters, not as ads.** In the B2B world, a forthright communication in letter format is much more effective than an e-mail that looks and smells like an ad.
9. **Take your time.** As you would with B2C (and any other communication, for that matter), let your B2B e-mail message sit for a day or two after you complete it. Show it to colleagues and other business people, and get their opinions. In almost every case, the passage of time and other people's input will help you improve your messaging and writing.

10. **Remember your e-mail is likely to be passed around.** Because it's so easy for e-mail to be forwarded, assume your message will be sent to others if the initial recipient has any interest. You may want to include links to information that is relevant to others, including technical details, operations info, and financial data.
11. **Mimic your verbal presentation.** Although a lot of what you say in person may not be necessary or appropriate for an initial e-mail, you should still consider how you verbally present your product or service, whether by phone or in person. Think about what points you stress (those could be underlined or bolded in your e-mail) and the words you use (stick with verbal explanations that people understand).
12. **Check your signature block.** Make sure it's complete: your full name, title, company, address, phones, pager, fax, e-mail, and Web site links. Give the recipient a choice of how to contact you for more information.
13. **Carefully choose when you actually send the mail.** Most business people spend Monday mornings catching up on the e-mail, postal mail, and phone calls that have piled up since the previous Friday. You don't want your e-mail mixed in with dozens or even hundreds of communications that are being reviewed by recipients.
14. **Prepare your subject line carefully.** After the sender address, the subject line is the first thing B2B e-mail recipients will look at. It's akin to what you might say on the phone in the first 5 to 10 seconds. The subject line should directly relate to the primary benefit your product or service offers.
15. **Use graphics wisely.** Business people are interested in benefits, details, other customers, and so forth. Unless graphics enhance your message in a meaningful way, don't use them.
16. **Make sure links within your e-mail display and work properly.** When you list "for more information" links, make sure they are clickable so the recipient does not have to cut and paste. Also make sure they go to the exact page you want and this landing page is up to date and provides the information you want them to have. Sending people to your home page and leaving to them to figure out where to go is not a good idea.
17. **Be wary about sending attachments.** Most of the time, you don't know what software the recipient has or what filter settings are enabled. Sending PDFs, Word documents, or Excel spreadsheets may not be a good idea, since you don't know if the recipient can read -- or even receive -- what you send. A better idea: links to Web pages where the information contained in the attachments is displayed.
18. **Test.** Just as you do with any consumer e-mail campaign, test subject lines and message copy. Testing is no less critical with B2B e-mails.
19. **Be complete.** Most B2B e-mail recipients will form some sort of preliminary conclusion about your product or service before they respond to your e-mail. They'll determine for themselves whether your e-mail helps meet their needs. That's why providing details and complete information is important -- to give recipients the details they need to make the decision to call you or act on your offer.
20. **Don't look like everyone else.** Spend some time reviewing B2B e-mails you get to see what others are doing. Get on the e-mail lists of your competitors so you can see how they communicate. Analyse them all and find ways to differentiate yourself from the pack.