

# The Rules of Email Etiquette for Legal Marketers

Back in late 2016, a simple [misspelling in an email](#) by an aide to Hillary Clinton campaign manager John Podesta played a pivotal role in the email hack of the Democratic National Committee. It turns out the aide wrote that a forwarded phishing email was a “legitimate” message, when the aide meant to write that it was an “illegitimate” email – a typo that helped ensure the phishing email’s success – and the rest is history.

Most email mistakes don’t rise to that level of incompetence, consequence or damage, but who hasn’t felt panic or sweat upon the realization of having made an embarrassing email mistake? While not typically qualifying as [crises](#), many simple communications failures and misunderstandings can be attributed to not following best practices in professional use of email.

As legal publicists and marketers, we are in the business of communicating about and to lawyers and law firm stakeholders – and lawyers are sticklers for accuracy and precise thought. That raises the stakes for our emails even higher. (As an aside, some lawyers and journalists can be the biggest rule-breakers when it comes to the etiquette and best practices discussed in this article. But just try to do as I suggest, not as they do. Lawyers also often have other considerations, such as intentionally eliminating conversation threads from email replies to limit dissemination of content that could pose a data risk.)

I read somewhere that workers send more than a billion emails every day. Suffice to say, most of us write so many emails that we don’t always have the time or foresight to [consider etiquette and safeguards in our communications](#). Who among us has not spent the bulk of a day writing, sending and responding to emails – coordinating introductions, conducting follow-ups, pitching to media, and conversing with other marketers and lawyers, including one-on-one and group chats? Arguably, email is *the* most important work tool we have, especially for publicists – and even many lawyers, increasingly – who work frequently or even exclusively in a cloud-based environment.

Therefore, I would argue that it is fundamentally critical to occasionally brush up on email best practices. Is it worth dedicating this entire blog post to providing a few important reminders? Heck, yeah!

## Always, *A/ways* Proofread

Like diamonds, emails are forever. You and I may not worry about Robert Mueller finding a disparaging or otherwise damning comment we shared with a professional confidant, but a stupid spelling error can be almost criminal. [Poor spelling, grammar and punctuation](#) are viewed by many as signs of low intelligence, trustworthiness or conscientiousness.



**Randy Labuzinski**

Vice President

Public Relations

773.405.7583

[rlabuzinski@jaffepr.com](mailto:rlabuzinski@jaffepr.com)

How to protect yourself? Double-check the name of the person you're emailing. Jane doesn't want to be greeted as James, and vice versa.

Proofing also means double-checking that you attached the document you intended to attach and referenced as attached. I particularly like smart email programs that scan for words like "attached" and alert me when I hit "Send" if I forgot to attach something. This has saved me from duplicate emails on numerous occasions (or sending a message without its attachment).

## **Watch What You Say (as Well as Type)**

Dictating an email message via a mobile phone speech-to-text application is okay in a pinch or rush, but there's still no excuse for not taking a few extra seconds to proofread. It also doesn't hurt to include a signature on your mobile email that asks for accommodation for any unintended errors on the go.

## **Speaking of the Signature ...**

Email signatures really are a "must," and most companies require them in their employees' emails. The signature should clearly identify you and your affiliation, and also provide relevant phone or fax contact information. It's also a good practice to include a privacy notice or legal disclaimer.

## **Don't Short-shrift Your Back-up Email**

Sometimes I am forced to use a back-up or alternate email address for business emails. Technical glitches, server outages or the inability to get an email past a recipient's spam filter are all reasons I must go to a back-up to get an email to someone on deadline. But that doesn't mean your back-up email domain (Gmail, Yahoo, Mail, AOL, etc.) should appear any less professional to the recipient. I keep it simple by using a dedicated Gmail account, with an address that incorporates my name, as my back-up email, and an email signature that clearly identifies me and includes all relevant professional contact information. The more seamless the communications from one address to another, the better.

## **Wait! To Whom Is This Email Really Going?**

Have you ever sent an email to the wrong person or cc'd someone you shouldn't have? I'm pretty sure we all have done that. It can be painfully embarrassing at best and job-threatening at worst. The lesson here is to always double-check the To: and CC: lines for each email.

## **Clean It Up**

Long email strings can be both very useful and very frustrating. It's great to have the history and context of a conversation, but when a string includes dozens or hundreds of emails, it makes sense to start anew at some point. This is particularly helpful when the

conversation veers to different topics. Changing the subject line to fit the topic also can help. If an email about a new deadline project comes in with a continued string and original headline about a meeting that took place months ago, the recipient could be confused and not respond as necessary.

## Don't Leave 'em Hanging

Try to consistently respond to senders with a "thank you." We all like our efforts and communications to be acknowledged. Also, technology is never foolproof, so do we ever really, truly know for sure if an email reaches its intended recipient if we don't get some sort of acknowledgment or receipt? A simple "thank you" provides peace of mind. It also goes without saying— when possible – to reply to emails in a timely fashion. If I don't have the information someone emails me about, I try to at least respond to acknowledge the request if it will be some time before I can provide substantive content.

## Prepare to Be Published

This tip is mainly for those of us who communicate with editors and reporters and do so primarily via email. As publicists for attorneys and law firms, we always should assume that a reporter may use and publish quoted comments from a source included in an email even without asking for permission. Suffice to say, don't write anything you wouldn't want to see published, and make sure quoted content is accurate and proofed, with proper attribution.

## Be Cognizant of Tone

Much has been observed and written about how tone in emails is so frequently misperceived as angry, flippant, abrupt, dismissive, etc. A wrong perception can quickly become an unwanted reality. As more professionals work in the cloud and away from their colleagues, this is a problem that will linger. I try to inoculate against negative perceptions by always being thankful and gracious in my emails. I also like to mix in phrases like "I hope," "if possible" and "at your convenience," etc. Without the benefit of facial cues and vocal tones, it takes a little extra effort to make sure the recipient doesn't misread the intent of your email.

Have some other tips on how to make email effective and productive? Contact me, [Randy Labuzinski](mailto:randy@jaffepr.com), at [rlabuzinski@jaffepr.com](mailto:rlabuzinski@jaffepr.com).