

# **Dangerous Email**

**Using Email Effectively and Avoiding  
Its Traps and Pitfalls**



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**The Gadwall Group™**

*Tame Your Technology*

# Introduction

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You can always tell newcomers to the Internet. They do certain things that reflect their lack of understanding of the technology, and are insensitive to some of the social customs and "netiquette" that have developed in the short time that the Internet and email have been around. Our objective is to do nothing more than give you some hints that will help you enjoy Internet, as well as improve the experience of the people you interact with.

In addition, we will discuss the reliability of email and how to improve its usefulness, ways in which email can be abused (along with corrective action), and a simple, inexpensive and safe way to introduce your company to the wonders of the Internet and email.

# Looking like an old pro

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*This section will brief you on some of the customs of the Internet and how to best use email technology. And we'll warn you of some of the traps that you can fall into.*

## **Beware of forwarding**

One of the most common ways that newcomers distinguish themselves is by forwarding chain letters, jokes, virus alerts and hoax and scam warnings. Try to avoid the messages about sick little girls that are collecting emails and just about anything regarding Bill Gates. Don't forward an email about the latest scam that is going around regarding Y2K or the phone company. It gets worse in December when everyone is sending cute little animated GIF's of Santa Claus pictures. Aside from the concerns about safe computing (be suspicious about ANY attachment - even from someone you know), your correspondent might have a slow link and doesn't want to deal with the 250K file you're sending them.

When forwarding, include a summary of what you're sending. Don't send a jumbled email message that the readers will have to spend time decoding. Tell them what it is in a sentence or two. If it's an attachment, tell them what it is or does. If it's worthwhile to forward, it's worth a moment of your time to summarize the reason why you forwarded it.

## **Use blind copies**

If you just have to forward something (hopefully it's a joke and not news that an asteroid will hit Rhode Island on Tuesday), use the blind copy function on your emailer. Most mail packages today give you the ability to send a message to multiple people without having those addresses appear in the message, ala "CC:" If you have a "BCC" field or option on your mailer, use it. People are getting very protective of their email addresses and you won't keep your friends if you broadcast their addresses to all of your other friends. Spammers love to get these kind of messages - they get tons of email addresses to harvest. If your email program doesn't have a blind copy function, you should either upgrade to one that does or not forward messages to multiple recipients.

## **Email signatures**

Signatures are essentially email business cards. Put all the appropriate contact information on them, as well as a short message about your company. If you're using email for personal purposes, try to avoid slogans and cute sayings. They may sound brilliant now, but after about 6 months, they will set people's teeth on edge whenever they get a message from you.

If you're going to tell jokes, or come up with snazzy sayings, keep changing them. I subscribe to one particular mail list where the administrator includes a different funny line EVERY time she sends a message - about 3 times a week. She makes her messages interesting. If you're going to try to make entertaining signatures, you're going have to work at it. Otherwise, make a simple business card that is simple and straightforward and forget about it.

Finally, beware of creating images using "-", "|", "/", "~" etc. They might look good on your screen, but may look like garbage on the receiver's monitor. And they fall into the category of sickeningly cute.

### **Participating in forums and mailing lists**

If you join one of these online communities, such as "Tire Irons for 1974 Escorts", you might be tempted to immediately ask, "So, I'm new here...what's the best tire iron for a 1975 Taurus?" You've just violated two rules. First of all, you've asked the same basic question that every new member has posed since they started the forum in 1987. Secondly, you're not on topic. These people don't know or care about Tauruses - they like Escorts.

Pay attention to the forum. Don't just jump in. Carefully read messages for a week or so, and review the past messages or archive of the forum if one is available. The odds are that your question has been asked before and you'll get a feel for the types of questions that the forum members are interested in answering or discussing.

### **Dealing With Your Emotions**

One of the problems with email is that it can become very conversational. When you're writing letters, the very nature of the activity forces you to think about your words and probably go through one or two drafts - certainly a crossed out word or two. You think about your words and the effect they'll have. But with email, it happens fast and many of us just type and send. However, emotions that you thought were obvious may be invisible to the reader. Alternatively, they may read attitudes into your message that you had no intention of conveying. Here are a few rules to live by:

#### *Don't criticize*

1. Never, EVER, chastise or criticize someone via a public Internet forum or, in most cases, by private email. First of all, why do they care what you think? Secondly, it's probably none of your business. Thirdly, well-meaning and constructive criticism can hit someone like a sledge-hammer and you're not there to soften the blow when you see their reaction.

Fourthly, if you don't know them, you might be putting your foot into your oral cavity. I once saw a young kid read a guy the riot act because the kid thought he asked a stupid question. It turned out that the other guy happened to be a world recognized expert on the subject, and if the little whippersnapper had thought about the message and the way it was worded, he would have avoided the storm of rage that was directed at him by other members of the forum

*How is your message being received?*

2. Even if you don't feel like you're criticizing someone, they may perceive that you are. Never speak in a condescending tone and NEVER use CAPITAL LETTERS to make a point, unless you're me.

*Let your message cool off*

3. If you just have to get something off your chest, write the message, then save it. Let it percolate for a day, then reread it. I guarantee you'll edit it down. Remember, on the Internet, no one can hear you scream. And you can't get those messages back once you've clicked on the send button.

*Don't dissect their message*

4. If you find yourself repeating a little bit of what the other guy said, writing a couple of paragraphs in response, then doing it again with another excerpt from his message, just stop it. You're in diatribe mode and you don't know it. Think about it (see above) and you'll probably tone it down. Select only a couple of his points and respond to them, quoting only a little of what he said.

*Use emoticons*

5. Use emoticons such as " ;-)". If there is any risk of my message being misinterpreted as a criticism or mean remark, I'll throw a smiley face in to make it clear what I'm really thinking. Remember, they can't hear your tone of voice, they can't see your face and they don't have a clue about your body language. So give the reader as many clues as possible.

**Including the other message**

If the other person wrote 3 pages, don't include all 3 pages in your response. Just include the person who wrote it and the relevant sections. Otherwise people will spend too much time searching for your comments. You'll occasionally see a message where someone has copied the entire 3 page message from the sender and then added "me to".

**Upper case**

THIS IS THE MARK OF A REALLY NEW PERSON ON THE INTERNET. THEY'VE EITHER FORGOTTEN TO TURN OFF THE CAPS LOCK KEY, OR THEY THINK THAT THEY ARE SUPPOSED TO TYPE IN UPPER CASE BECAUSE THAT IS THE WAY THEIR ELECTRIC BILL IS PRINTED.

**Read  
messages  
carefully**

Before responding to an email message, reread it to make sure that you fully understand the it. There are way too many messages where the responder has missed the point entirely and is actually arguing the same position that the original writer is.

**Proof  
read**

Read your messages at least once before you send them. If you expect me to read it, the least you can do is reread it to make sure that what you've written makes sense. Avoid the "type-and-send" approach to email, and check to make sure that your message makes sense and that it is readable.

## **Making sure your mail gets there**

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*I sent my printer an email containing an order a few weeks ago. After a few days, I gave him a call to follow up. He never got my message. I had since decided to hold off on that particular project, so I suggested he never mind. He subsequently checked with his ISP who "found" about 35 messages that he never received. Mine was one of them. Because the ISP screwed up, my printer lost some business. And I, frankly, got a reprieve.*

**Email is  
unreliable**

The message here is that email is unreliable and you should never assume that, just because you clicked on "send" and no error message comes back, that your message was received.

I received a message a couple of weeks ago. It was completely, 100% garbled. There was not one readable letter on it, including the headers. Not only could I not read it, I couldn't tell the sender that it was screwed up. The following week, a client asked me if I had gotten the message he'd copied to me. I thought for a moment and then advised him that I hoped it wasn't important. As it turns out, it was an FYI, so no harm was done.

Lots of things can go wrong with email. Your email package could blow, the Internet could cough, your ISP might have problems, their ISP might have problems, their internal email system could crash or their computer might have problems. And that's just the technical stuff. There are human issues as well.

**Your message  
is "virtual"**

When you get regular paper mail, or even faxes, you are getting an actual, readable piece of paper. Unless that piece of paper gets misfiled, it's there, somewhere on your correspondent's desk, waiting for him or her to deal



with it. They may throw it away, but they might at least glance at it on its way to the circular file. But with email, you don't have any of that physical mass. Your message is nothing but another entry on a list of maybe tens or hundreds of messages, depending on how busy they are, how many email lists they're on, how long they've been on vacation or how much spam they receive. So your message is fighting with lots of other messages, some legitimate and some not so desired. If your friend has to wade through 150 messages in a day, what are the odds that they're going to even see your message, let alone read it carefully? Bear in mind that people are very busy. Email is fast becoming a chore that most would rather not deal with. You're not helping any by sending them another one.

### **Multiple addresses**

Another problem is multiple email addresses. Many people now have more than one addresses (I have 3 that I check regularly), including many that are still active, but they don't check (I have about 5 of those). They might have addresses for work, home, and online forums. If they've been on the Internet for a couple of years, they probably have at least one old address from an ISP that they're not using anymore. Maybe they've changed jobs recently. At least with regular mail, they're likely to have only two addresses - home and work. Unless they store their worldly possessions on a bicycle, the home address is probably pretty stable. And the Postal Service will forward it, or at least let you know it didn't get through.

So how do you improve your email connectivity?

### **Ask for an acknowledgment**

1. The best thing you can do is ask your correspondent to reply to the message. Some mail packages allow you to ask for a return receipt. I don't recommend that because it isn't an assurance that they've READ the message...just that their computer displayed it. It's not the same thing. In the body of the text, ask them to respond to your email, maybe even asking them to acknowledge that they understand the important parts.

Don't abuse this. Don't rush out and add "please respond that you've read and understood this message" to your signature file. Don't demand acknowledgments on every email you send. You'll really tick people off and they'll just ignore you. Use it for those really important messages.

### **It may not get read right away**

2. Remember that the message may not get read for a while. Just because you have nothing to do but sit at a desk and read and write emails all day doesn't mean that they have the same sweet gig. Even though email gets there instantly (well, sort of), don't assume that your reader is hovering over their computer constantly checking email and waiting for yours to arrive. They might be on vacation, they might be having trouble logging into their computer, the network might be down, or they might be out of the office. Or they just might be trying to get some real work done. I

personally try to never to do email between 9am and 4pm. So getting a same day response from me is a dicey proposition. Similarly, I avoid expecting an email answer in less than 48 hours.

Today, as I write this, I got a message from a friend who is a teacher. I had sent him a message last May after school let out (I didn't realize that his district ended their year that early). Today I got a response. He just came back from summer vacation. The message wasn't important, although I was curious, at the time, why he had not responded.

Do not consider email to be a form of instant communication. It is merely a form of paperless memo writing that gets prepared and delivered faster and more efficiently. It doesn't mean it gets read faster. It can save a tremendous amount of time (unless you're getting 100 messages a day), but it is not the only form of communication available. If you're looking for instant communication, and you don't need the cover-your-butt documentation that email provides, there is this little device on your desk - you may remember it - it's called a telephone.

### **Test your connectivity**

3. Subscribe to a couple of newsletter services or email lists. Even if you don't read them, they can be a useful test of your Internet provider. If you miss a day, you might have a problem and you can investigate. But if you don't have a regular source of emails that you expect every day, you may miss several days worth of email messages without even realizing it.

### **Avoid the noise**

4. Avoid having your message get lost in the noise. You might think this means using a subject that includes "Read this!" or "Hi from your old buddy!" Nope. These are actual subject lines from spam that I've received. And I hit the delete key before I even read them. I did look at the sender's email address and didn't recognize it, so I felt pretty safe. Create a subject that really describes the subject of your message and send it from an email address that they're familiar with.

If you've decided that, from now on, you're going to use Hotmail for personal email instead of "mary.jones@jones.com", then make it recognizable. Don't make it "jones999a45b@hotmail.com". Would your recipient recognize it as you if your subject was "Hi there!"? Trust me, it'll get deleted. Instead, you might use "maryjones5@hotmail.com" with a subject of "Jim - I've changed my email address."

### **Generic email addresses**

5. Beware of generic email addresses, like info@gadwall.com or webmaster@joeblow.net. You should try to find a specific address for a specific individual. Sometimes generic addresses are checked - but sometimes they get stale. If you're looking at a web page and that is the only address you have, use it. But also call the 800 number if you really

need to get in touch. Or write them a letter. If they don't give you a number or a postal address, I wouldn't do business with the company anyway.

### **Don't overload the message**

6. Avoid putting too much information into one message. I've made this mistake many times, and still make it. Email must have been invented in the land of the people-with-short-attention-spans. By its very nature, people tend to think of email as delivering little, digestible packets of information. They're not expecting tomes and they're not expecting any additional topics besides what you put in your subject line. So, if you've got lots to say and multiple topics to cover, consider separate messages. I've had people, more than once, bury an important point in an otherwise pretty worthless email message that I just skimmed. If you've got something important to say, give the subject its own "packet."

Recently, an associate (who was given more than his share of drivel) sent me a message which was full of the usual meaningless information. About 20 lines down, he mentioned that our next meeting was being canceled. I didn't pick that up and wasted half a day going to and from the non-existent meeting. He indignantly claimed that he HAD announced the cancellation. But he had failed at COMMUNICATING the message. A better approach would have been two messages: "Further discussions on the fourth revision of our mission statement" and "meeting canceled!"

Remember that there are other forms of communication. I saw a posting on an email list the other day asking for the email address of a company, so that the poster could contact them. Uh, there are other ways to communicate. There's the phone, fax and that old reliable - the US Mail. Don't focus on only the online modes of communication. They aren't reliable and, in many cases, there are faster ways of getting in touch.

## **What NOT to do with email**

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*Here are some ways that email can be abused in a work environment along with some recommendations for corrective action.*

### **No email between 9am and 4pm**

Essentially, give people an hour in the morning and an hour in the late afternoon to do their email. During the day, they should be talking to people on the phone or face to face; or doing other real work. If you reduce the time they have to do email, you'll force them to be a little more careful about much email they send out. For example, when I was a sales manager, I used to get about 100 messages a day. I announced to my staff that I didn't want to see any emails sent during the day. Without too much

prodding my volume decreased by at least 25%. I really don't think I missed anything important except for the frequent "CYA" messages. And the company I was at had a LOT of CYA messages. But that's another story.

### **No email conversations**

If there are more than 2 cycles in an email exchange, stop and go talk to each other. You obviously have a lot to talk about and email is taking too much time. As I've said earlier, you don't get body language, tonal inflections or facial expressions when you use email. If the communication is complex (and it obviously is if you can't get everything worked out in 2 cycles), then maybe a face to face meeting is appropriate.

### **Bosses can't be bosses**

Bosses are not allowed to criticize, chastise or reprimand via email. If you don't have the guts to do it in person, you don't deserve to be in management. I've seen it written elsewhere that email allows more open and frank communications. Sure, for the coward who can't look his or her employees in the eyes. Reading an email at 5pm from your boss telling you that you really screwed up can be extraordinarily crushing to that employee's morale. Particularly if the boss went home 5 minutes ago and the poor soul has to wait until tomorrow to find out what the problem is. Take an assertiveness course or find something else to do. You can't hide behind the keyboard.

### **Limit directives and orders**

Major projects should be assigned in person. This is all subject, of course, to your company culture, geographic dispersal, and type of business. But it's too easy to lose sight of the impact that your instructions are having on your staff. Seeing those grimaces across the conference table might not be the most pleasant part of being a boss, but they provide you with feedback about the work load, type of work and the difficulty of the task. If you don't want to deal with those harsh realities, then maybe you should be doing something else. Use email for follow up, detailed instructions, fine tuning, etc. But assign work in person.

## A simple way to protect your company, and your profits

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If you're just getting into email for your company, don't overdo it.

There are lots of options for you. The big email companies will want you to buy everything but the kitchen sink, and they'll price it very aggressively for you. But if you just want to exchange messages with your customers, do you really need all the extras? Get email installed first. Then you can worry about scheduling, task management, bulletin boards, document management, and instant messaging?

Probably one of the simplest ways to get online is to get an AOL account. Lots of people do it every day, they can't all be wrong. Other Internet service providers will also help you get online as well.

If you really want to get serious about being online, you can get your own domain name. For example, if your company's name was "Widgets R Us", then you might try to get widgetsrus.com for a domain name. You can do this on your own, from a number of portal and web sites, but it's a little intimidating. Just about any consultant will help you, as well as your ISP. The system gets a little more complicated, but it can be overcome. It is very nice to have your own domain name...it makes you look like you're a real Internet company! I highly recommend it.

If you just have one or two people in your organization who need email, and you don't feel the need to send email to each other within your organization, then just connect one computer in your office to the Internet to handle email. Don't feel obligated to have everyone in your organization have email. As mentioned above, email can be a problem. If your company can truly use it at every desktop, then get it. But beware of rolling it out to everyone until you're sure it's going to be useful. By setting up one computer as your email machine, you'll be able to keep tabs on your staff's Internet and email usage...and you'll be able to figure out when you need to expand it to more users.

Another benefit of the single Internet computer is to provide some security for your network. If the machine gets hacked or gets corrupted by a virus, who cares? Erase the drive and rebuild it. Your staff doesn't lose any productivity because the important stuff on their own computers never got touched.

## **Internet Resources**

We maintain a collection of links to sites and articles that may be of interest to readers of this report. Please visit [www.gadwall.com/internet/](http://www.gadwall.com/internet/) to find our Internet Resources section.

## **Programs**

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# The Gadwall Group™

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Did this report provide you with valuable ideas or information? yes/no

Did this report meet your expectations? yes/no

What did we do well?

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Where could we improve?

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On what other topics would you like us to offer reports?

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May we add you to our email newsletter?

Please show your email address\_\_\_\_\_

May we add you to our monthly US Mail list?

Name\_\_\_\_\_

Position\_\_\_\_\_

Company\_\_\_\_\_

Address\_\_\_\_\_

City\_\_\_\_\_State\_\_\_\_\_Zip\_\_\_\_\_