



WELCOME TO THE

(email)

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ESTABLISHING LAW & ORDER IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

EDITORIAL | DR. JULIE MILLER



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The blessing and the curse of the digital revolution! With email, instant and text messaging, cell phones, Blackberries and the Internet, we are drowning in data overload. **And the constant interruptions cost the U. S. economy an estimated \$558 billion annually.**

This staggering number does not add in the cost of poorly written emails that land companies and employees in hot legal trouble, destroy long-term client relationships, and ruin reputations — just review Mike Brown's emails (former FEMA chief) as Hurricane Katrina raged on and you will understand.

Add to this mix **a lack of civility and common sense**, and you have an explosive brew.

So, what to do? For starters, treat email writing as *writing*, not as casual conversation. Whether words are written in the sky, sent by carrier pigeon or via the Web, words must connect with the reader. Good writing allows this to happen; poor writing does not. Currently, writing online is still, as author Patricia O'Conner writes, in its Wild West stage — with everybody shooting from the hip and no sheriff in sight.

Establish Law & Order

Therefore, establish some law and order by developing an email protocol, regardless of whether you are a multi-national or a single shingle firm. Simply stated, it's "the way we do business around here" in terms of communicating via email with co-workers and customers. It is a code of behavior, a set of standards as to how you will frame your words, manage your inbox, even extend your brand.

Below is a short list of questions to visit at your next meeting. Your answers could be the beginning of a company-wide document.

How do you greet and close messages? Companies are putting together a series of key phrases used solely for openings and closings. Remember, you would never call without greeting someone. Why would you not in your emails?

What does your email signature say about your company? It should be an extension of your company's brand. Professional with no cutesy sayings, it should contain all contact information. Establish a standard for font style and size. Also, because you have limited real estate, consider placing your signature block horizontal rather than vertical.

What is the company policy about blind copies? Some companies only use them for e-blasts; others say they are strictly verboten. Discuss why, when and how you use them. Caution: Some computer programs allow all those who you do not want to see your email to view it if the recipient hits "reply all."

Do you have a message for the out of office auto-responder, and if so, when do you turn it on? When you are away for four hours? Or for one day? A large bank requires if an employee is immersed in an important project, it must be turned on if he/she is gone from the office for more than one hour.

How often do you check emails? Some companies set their programs so emails are only called up hourly, thus reducing down time and increasing productivity.

How soon do you return emails? Within four hours? 24 hours? Some companies require that all emails be answered within the same business day.

Do you use emoticons? Buzzing bees, dancing bears, smiley faces. Suggestion: Heartily rule against it.

How many emails before you pick up the phone? The rule of thumb seems to be three. If the issues are not resolved, pick up the phone or walk down the hall.

What is your company's policy about writing business letters, accessing confidential information, or

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handling racial or sexual harassment? Your email policy should be compatible with these documents.

How will you ensure that employees understand your protocol? For example, who is the contact person when questions arise? How will updates be handled? Will you schedule trainings?

Email has become the biggest productivity drain in businesses today. Getting a handle on this daily data dump by establishing procedures — etiquette if you will — will make you and your company stand above the crowd, and, possibly, bring law and order to the untamed world of Internet communication. What are your “best practices”? 