

Think Carefully

Before You E-mail

by Steven Birmingham

Scientists believe humans developed rudimentary speech around 300,000 years ago in Africa, and written language about 5,000 years ago in present-day Iraq.

The first email was sent in Massachusetts in 1971, so we've had less than 40 years to practice using this new medium. As a result, we're not very good at it: 89 percent of senders think they write good messages, but only 45 percent of all messages are rated good by recipients.

Research shows several factors conspire to undermine email's effectiveness. It is less natural and less stimulating than face-to-face and phone conversations. Messages are perceived more negatively than senders intend. Most messages are written quickly and not proofread, so they are often filled with errors. Since email recipients can't provide real-time feedback, these mistakes often go uncorrected, which can lead to confusion. Email has been shown to be a disinhibitor (like alcohol), so people tend to type things they later regret. Research also suggests email amplifies prejudices.

To make matters worse, most email advice in books and on Web sites is bogus. Messages should not be "short and to-the-point," because the majority of messages are already too short and open to interpretation. Using ALL CAPS should not be avoided, because it is one of the few ways to add much-needed emphasis to certain words in electronic communication. Messages should not "always" contain a certain

greeting or signature, because those standards are still evolving in the business community.

Email can be dangerous to your company, as drugmaker Wyeth learned to the tune of \$21 billion, and dangerous to your career, as discovered by former FEMA Director Michael Brown, former West Virginia Governor Bob Wise, former inmate Martha Stewart, and several currently-incarcerated Enron executives.

To avoid their fate, think carefully before you email; many tasks are better handled in person or by phone. Email

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should be used mostly for sharing information, requesting information or requesting action. When emailing, make your messages a little longer, a little more exciting and slightly more positive than you think they need to be. Tailor your message to the recipient, compose carefully, proofread, and use all the tools in your communication toolkit including ALL CAPS and emoticons (smiley faces).



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