New Year's Resolution: Extend Etiquette to your Emails

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist

This time of year, many of us search for New Year's business resolutions. I have one to suggest. Improve our email etiquette.

And at the top of my etiquette list is the simple pledge: I will try to answer every valid business email I receive.

I know of one company that requires all employees to answer every email he or she receives by the end of the employee's work shift. The answer does not have to be a researched response. Rather it can be a simple acknowledgment that lets the sender know an email has not shot into the dark hole of cyberspace.

Like fingernails scratching across a chalk board, nothing raises the hair on many people's necks more than "cyber silence." What are they to make of it? Did their emails reach the intended recipients? Or have they been snagged in over-sensitive spam filters?

Should they send inquiries that may annoy the recipients? Or should they assume their emails have arrived and will be acknowledged when the recipients are good and ready?

True, I will not respond to the people writing me from Nigeria asking for money; nor will I respond to the many offers for online pharmaceuticals. But it should not be hard to differentiate between "spam" and legitimate correspondence.

If we value our business clients and strive to provide good customer service, we should strive to provide a simple, "Got it, thanks," when an email drops into our email systems. It is a good habit to acquire and a good resolution to make for 2014.

Other email etiquette to sharpen during 2014 includes:

--Don't respond to emails when you are angry. Wait a few hours to cool down before putting a heated response in writing. Assume every email you send will be seen by others. Write accordingly.

--Use exclamation points and UPPERCASE sparingly. You may think you are being "attention getting," but many people find this downright annoying.

--Watch for surprises. Using "blind copy" to secretly keep someone in the loop can backfire. Unexpectedly the blind copy may jump into the email conversation. The safest route is to copy and paste the message into a new email and send to the "secret" recipient.

--Beware of "reply to all." Do you really want all the original recipients to receive your reply? It really isn't necessary for the "got it" or thanks" type of response.

--Avoid using "text" or "twitter" short cut language. For example, "U" for "you" looks unprofessional in an email.

--Craft a "subject line" that will provide clear and accurate information, and keep your email out of spam folders.

--If you are sending an email to an unfamiliar recipient, include brief introductory information. A clear signer with both first and last names, plus contact information also will help. Forget or be cautious about including a cute "thought for the day."

--Keep it clean. An off-colored joke or a sarcastic response can become viral with a simple "forward" and not serve you well in the future.

--Be cautious with attachments. Some people can't or won't open email attachments. If possible, paste text into the body of the email. If attachments are included, limit them to one or two and provide the recipient with an explanation.

--Keep your email short and to the point.

--When a conversation gets complicated, sensitive or heated, pick up the phone. Talk it out, so the recipient can hear your actual tone of voice rather than guess from words on a screen.

Email has made our lives more convenient and our communications more efficient. But used thoughtlessly, it can cause confusion and disengage those with whom we work.

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