

E-mail etiquette for wireless devices: 7 tips

This isn't another lecture about minding your e-mail manners. This is a story about a new subset of e-mail etiquette. Call it wireless politeness.

An increasing number of e-mail messages are being received on small, wireless devices with limited screen space — devices such as Windows Mobile-based Smartphones. Being polite is still important. But so are a number of other considerations, including brevity, diction and consideration for bandwidth.

Terri Thornton aptly sums up the frustration with today's wireless transmissions. "I hate checking my e-mail and having the subject line be so long that it scrolls forever until I can figure out what the topic is, or whether it's important," says Thornton, a Cincinnati marketing executive. "Worse is the one-word subject line that says nothing and you have to open it to find out what it is and discover it's 30 lines of nothing."

So what is the etiquette for sending e-mail messages to and from wireless devices? Here are seven tips.

1. First, determine if you're sending to a wireless device. How do you do that? Easy. Look for telltale signs, such as abbreviated words, emoticons, or the ever-helpful "Sent from my BlackBerry Handheld." When you see that, you can be relatively sure that when you reply, you're shooting a message through the air to a device that doesn't have a lot of room, both in terms of the display screen space and in terms of bandwidth. That's when you have to watch your wireless manners.

2. Don't overabrvt. Getting to the point quickly is good, but don't over-abbreviate your words and sentences until your recipient doesn't understand what you're saying. I mean, what's the harm in writing, "I sent the files you requested yesterday," rather than, "Sent fls u rqd ystrdy." Think I'm exaggerating? I have dozens of e-mails sent to me from wireless devices that were almost incomprehensible. Why return the favor? Be brief, but also be clear. It sure beats having to resend the message in order to clarify.

3. The subject line isn't everything, but it should often be the only thing. Want to make a wireless e-mail recipient really happy? Then keep your message so short and to the point that opening the actual message is unnecessary. For example, instead of a message header "call me, please," you should say "problem: pls call (your number)." This makes it far easier to process the information, and far less taxing on valuable air time. If your message is longer, be sure to give an appropriate header that's concise and can't be confused for spam. Otherwise, it could be ignored.

4. Put yourself in the receiver's shoes. If you violate any of these rules, be prepared to have your message ignored. "I always have longer messages or messages with lowered importance sent to my regular work account," says Samir Bhatnagar, a finance manager in Arlington, Va. And then, of course, there are spam guards that can be set so that e-mail that is legitimate but too wordy or containing too much HTML code can be summarily discarded. Do you really want that happening to your important messages?

5. Ask before you tell your life story. Graduates of the e-mail etiquette school already know this one. Before you send a big attachment, find out if the receiver can handle the file. With wireless e-mail, take that a step further. If you're thinking of sending more than a paragraph, check first to make sure the recipient can deal with the information. I once got chewed out by a client for sending a brief e-mail to an account that was being checked wirelessly through a satellite phone (he was at sea). I won't make that mistake again.

6. Cut the funny stuff. E-mails that contain animation, graphics, or anything else that might challenge the bandwidth-starved should be avoided at all costs. Evelyn Fine, who travels with a Palm Tungsten W, got so tired of the gibberish that she set her PDA to disregard the bells and whistles. "I have friends who send e-mail with smiley faces, animations and other useless additives," says Fine, president of a market research company in Daytona Beach, Fla. "My Palm immediately truncates the e-mail, assuming it's all garbage."

7. Skip your John Hancock. Signatures tend to get so big and lofty that they clog up the pipeline. It isn't just the name, phone number, address and several e-mail addresses. Now it seems as if every signature is also followed by lengthy legal disclaimers "This e-mail message, including any attachments, is for the sole use of the intended recipient(s) and may contain confidential and privileged information." Puh-leeze. No one needs to see that disclaimer when space is at a premium. And there's no easier way to strain a business relationship than to bog a wireless message down with that kind of gobbledygook.

Bottom line: keep it short and sweet — and remember that if you don't, you'll get ignored or worse, incur the wrath of a customer.

But relax. There's a way to at least heighten your awareness of the fact that you're dealing with wireless recipients. In Outlook, scroll over to the Navigation Pane, click Mail. Then on the Tools menu, click Rules and Alerts. You can create a rule to move messages from a user who you know is on a wireless account, or based on keywords such as "Blackberry," to a designated folder.

That way, at least you know when you have to be on your best behavior.