

E-mail Openings – Make Them Work

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Humans have the ability to synthesize data with incredible precision. In his book, *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell describes how human beings can form accurate impressions of situations and people based on just a tiny amount of data. Gladwell calls this “thin slicing,” which is the ability to sort out germane factors from a large array of data with lightning speed. Let’s look at the first few words of some example e-mail notes and see how people are likely to react to them.

- *“Hi Alan”* This is a friendly and neutral salutation that puts the reader in a happy place. Why? You have used the most important word in your reader’s vocabulary. You used his name along with the happy word, “Hi.” After those two words, your reader is subconsciously saying to himself, “This is going to be a nice note.”
- *“Alan”* Here you use his favorite word again, but without the word “Hi” or “Greetings,” your note starts out on a sober, stern, or businesslike note. Your reader is wondering whether he is going to get chewed out or get a raise.
- *“So Alan”* This is an alarming opening to an e-mail. The reader will instinctively cringe before even reading the third word. This is going to be rough. Either Alan has previously written something to upset you, or you have a serious question about something he has done.
- *No name or greeting* Here you have lost an excellent opportunity to start your note with a polite greeting. Alan will usually not miss it on a conscious level, but he will be wary about the contents of your note until he reads further. Without the name as a courteous salutation, the first couple words will set the tone for better or worse. If you start with “Once again...” you are signaling that Alan is in trouble unless he knows you are thrilled with his most recent performance. At worst this is a trust withdrawal, and at best you have missed the opportunity for a trust deposit.
- *“You dummy”* There is no mistaking the tone of this greeting. Alan is going to put on his flack jacket before reading this note.

- *“Bless you, Alan”* This is the kind of note Alan will print out and put on his wall or take home to show his wife.

The words used to begin a note are the first “thin slice” of the tone for the entire e-mail. Make sure you get started on the right track. There is momentum when reading notes. If the reader starts out in a good frame of mind, things go more smoothly. If the opening is abrupt, curt, or is a blatant trust withdrawal, it will take a lot of honey in the rest of the note to make up for it.

It is like the difference between a conventional photograph and a hologram. If you take a photograph and cut out just a tiny piece of it, you will have only the data represented by that piece. If you cut out a tiny piece of a hologram and hold that piece up to the light, you will be able to see the entire image, only with less resolution than the larger hologram. Humans work the same way. If you have an entire note, you can study it and reveal great detail, but people can sense the body language in just a few words. The first few words of an e-mail are especially important. Let me share an extreme example for clarity.

It is the first day of an online class. None of the students know each other yet. Allison is responding to a question about whether leaders are made or born. Here is a short section of her note:

- *Allison writes:* “I really do not believe there is any such thing as a natural-born leader. I believe that leadership is an acquired skill and can be improved constantly. When I was seventeen, I was promoted to shift manager. I was not a good leader to say the least.”

Another student (Roger, who has not yet exchanged notes with Allison) replied to her note as follows:

- *Roger writes:* “Allison wake up!!! How many seventeen-year-old kids are asked to be a manager??”

The note goes on, but for purposes of this illustration, these few words are all that is required. I believe Allison had Roger pegged after the first three words, and probably did not even read the rest of his note. If she did read it, she heavily discounted the information. To her credit, she did not take the bait and fire back a strong rebuttal. She just pretended the note never happened, which is a good strategy in a case like this.

Roger’s note was a blatant example of starting out in a way that completely alienates the other person. Usually the damage is more subtle, but the impact is similar. Here is another example of a note that begins poorly:

- “I really think you should be careful when you write, ‘people like you’ in a note. It tends to peg you as a bigot or someone who likes to put people in boxes.”

The first five words, “I really think you should,” give away the body language before the real content of the message is reached. After the opening phrase, the reader is prepared to get a lecture and reacts accordingly. Here is another version of the same message with a more constructive opening:

- “That was an insightful note. One possible upgrade is to avoid the phrase ‘people like you,’ because some people might find that offensive.”

The reader is more likely to absorb and heed the advice in the second note based on how it starts.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book **Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online**, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.*

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