



The 30-second e-mail

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

You know how it feels. You are grazing your bloated inbox, and you see the name, Sam Jones. You cringe. Having waded through his prior tomes, you know that opening this e-mail will tie you up for at least 15 minutes trying to get the message. Sam writes really l-o-n-g notes and rarely uses paragraph breaks. He does not capitalize the start of sentences, so his writing is hard to decode. You pause, and pass the note because there is just not enough time to deal with the hassle.

Don't be a Sam Jones! Follow these seven simple rules, and people will appreciate your e-mail communications.

- 1. Make it easy on the reader.** Have a well formatted and short note that deals with a single topic in compressed format. Don't ramble!
- 2. Don't go "over the horizon."** Try to have the majority of your notes fit into the first window of a note. Reason: when the reader can see the start of your signature block on the bottom of the opening window, he knows that is all there is to the note. That is a psychological lift that puts the reader in a better frame of mind to absorb your meaning. When the text goes beyond the first page (over the horizon), the reader has no way to know how long your note is. This is a psychological burden that frustrates the reader subconsciously.
- 3. Aim for 15 to 30 seconds.** Try to have the e-mail compressed enough that it can be internalized in a half minute at the maximum. It will be remembered much more than one that takes 5 minutes to read.
- 4. Use bullet points.** Short, punchy bullets are easier to read than long complex sentences.
- 5. Highlight expected actions.** Delineate action items in a way that is not offensive. Do not use all caps. Sometimes bold text works, but I find it best to have a separate line like this:

Action: Please get me your draft report by Friday.

6. Be polite. Start with a friendly greeting and end with respect but not long or trite quotations.

7. Sometimes the Subject can be the whole note. In this case use EOM (End Of Message) to designate there is no note to open at all. It looks like this:

Subject: The Binford celebration is Wednesday 3 pm. EOM

If you follow these simple seven rules, people will pay more attention to your e-mails, and you will improve the hit rate of your communications. Not all notes can follow all of these rules, but if the majority of yours do, you will be greatly appreciated.

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