

## If your email fails this test, don't bother sending it



Somewhere out there lurks a group called the Plain English Campaign, an organization so peeved by bad business communication that it hands out annual Golden Bull awards for the worst of the worst. Here's a recent "winner," a snippet from an email sent by a business to a prospective client:

*(Company X) is engaged with the largest knowledge driven companies helping them transform the way their employees collaborate, breaking down silos and creating a flatter more dynamic organization that better leverages the thousands of staff that they have.*

37 words, almost no information.

Heather Baker, speaker and creator of the BakerWrite Speedwriting system, pointed out in her recent webinar that words themselves make up only 7% of the full message that's internalized when we speak or write. The rest comes from factors like intonation, style, body language—even timing and the restrictions of the medium in which we choose to communicate.

Email remains the primary place where that other 93% regularly goes haywire. How many do you receive each day that grate on you with their sloppiness, incompleteness or unintentionally brusque tone? "The *meaning* of your communication is the *response* you get back, regardless of your intention," Heather told her audience. So if you're taken aback by the *Re:* reply to what you put out there, go over your original message again. Chances are it failed this critical 7-point test that Heather offered:

**1. Is your email going First Class?** Whenever you compose one, imagine yourself writing it on paper by hand, putting it into an envelope, stamping it and walking it all the way down to the mailbox. The preparation of electronic mail should be treated no less seriously than this, because it's certainly taken that way.

**2. Are you maxing out the info in the subject line?** Heather recalled an infamous chain of emails that began with the subject line "Merry Christmas!" She and her co-worker re:'d each other with that line intact for months as the calendar and their ever-changing topics made it seem more and more absurd. Save your recipients' time and patience by giving them something to spot, sort and understand easily.

**3. Are you making it clear why they should give a hoot?** You should always be hyperaware of what's important to your reader's workday. If you know a person well, you can probably gauge their level of interest in what you have to say pretty accurately, and you may have to massage the message to make it hit their world a little harder. If they don't usually care about the goings-on in your department, why will this email make them pay attention? What's in it for them?

**4. Do you sound like they do?** Know your audience and speak at their level, using terms they themselves have used before. This creates an affinity between you. Imagine how your email would go down if it were delivered verbally; is it something you'd be likely to actually say to that particular person, or would they find it jarring because it's simply not the way they would ever speak?

**5. Are you coming off as a pipsqueak?** See if you can identify all the weak-kneed words in this offering: *"I'm sorry to bother you. Could I just ask a couple of questions? I'm not an expert but I think it's important. Sorry again."* Don't demean or lessen yourself by filling your email with apologies for intruding or presuming. You're not "just" anything—put yourself on equal terms with your reader from the outset or you'll find yourself getting blown off.

**6. Are you turning bad news into good news?** It doesn't take a whole lot of skill to stress or depress someone with a negative tidbit. Keep in mind that it's tough not to blame the messenger just a little in these cases, so look for a way to put a positive spin on a message you don't particularly want to send. You may be cutting the office coffee budget by 50%, but why not highlight the fact that glorious warm weather is just around the corner and iced drinks will be in vogue?

**7. Are you offering solutions, or just more problems?** Your message should be a tool for fixing things, not pointing out that the toolbox is empty and life is hard. Email is a tiny thief of time, so if you're going to take more of it away from the reader, make those words valuable ... and if you can't make them valuable, at least don't raise troublesome issues that can't be worked through on a screen. Bringing problems to people requires a different delivery method: picking up a phone or walking down the hallway for a pop-in. Remember what that was like...?