

Red Earth Software

How to send effective e-mail replies

White Paper



How to send effective email replies

Introduction

Email is fast replacing the telephone as main communications tool. Not only is the number of e-mails increasing exponentially, the importance placed in e-mail communications is also constantly increasing.

'Email has emerged as the most-used communications tool in the US and Canada, with 97 percent of workers using it every day or several days a week.'
Pitney Bowes, August 2000

This places a double burden on companies: they need to respond to more e-mails and at the same time they are being judged more and more on the speed and quality of their e-mails.

'Of business e-mail users 27 percent consider the current level of e-mails they receive to be excessive or intolerable; 41 percent believe that in five years' time the level of e-mails they receive will be 'excessive' or 'intolerable'.
Source: KMPG Consulting
Email@work 2000, Jonathan Whelan

Even though e-mail is ever increasing in importance, it is amazing to find how few companies actually respond well to their e-mails. Many companies send replies late or not at all, or send replies that do not actually answer the questions you asked.

*According to a 1999 survey of 125 websites by Jupiter Communications:
- 46% did not respond to e-mail inquiries for 5 days or more, or did not respond at all.
- In the same survey in 1998, this figure was 38% .*

If you are able to deal professionally with your e-mail communications, this will give your company that all important competitive edge. This white paper aims to show companies how to send good quality e-mail replies and, in doing so, help companies increase their competitive advantage. The following topics are covered:

- Why it is important to send good e-mail replies.
- What makes a good e-mail reply.

- How to ensure that your employees send good e-mail replies.
- How ReplyMate can help your employees send good e-mail replies.

Why is it important to send good e-mail replies?

There are a number of reasons why it is important to send good e-mail replies:

1. **Provide valued customer service:** Customers judge the quality of a company's products and services by the customer service they receive. Because companies are increasingly relying on e-mail as their main communications tool, the quality and speed of a company's e-mail responses are one of the most important 'valuation tools' for a company's customer service level.

'An external e-mail message is an advert for your company, in the same way that your company printed stationary is.'

Email@work 2000, Jonathan Whelan

2. **Gain competitive edge:** By replying to your customer's e-mail quickly and effectively, you can gain a competitive edge over your competitor and ensure that the customer does business with your company. For instance, if I am looking for a product or service that is offered by two companies at the same price on the Internet, how do I decide which one I will choose? Easy. I send an e-mail to both companies and see who sends the best and quickest reply! I would choose this company since it has gained my trust and I feel reassured that if I have a question or problem they would be there to help me.
3. **Avoid misunderstandings:** By writing clear, effective e-mail messages you can avoid miscommunications about the product or service you offer. In this way you can avoid disappointment and returned goods, and also make sure that your customers are aware of the full potential of your product or service.
4. **Save time:** By sending clear and informative e-mail messages you can avoid sending and receiving repeat e-mails. By sending swift replies you can eliminate e-mail messages and telephone calls following up on un-replied messages. This will not only save your employee's time, your customer will thank you for it as well!

'Inefficiencies lead to a higher number of messages for each worker to deal with. Many workers say they receive e-mails and faxes and then receive telephone calls asking if they have received the emails and faxes.'

Pitney Bowes, June 2000.

What makes a good e-mail reply?

For an e-mail reply to be effective, it must adhere to the following points:



1. **It must be concise and to the point** – Do not make an e-mail longer than it needs to be. Remember that reading an e-mail is harder than reading printed communications and a long e-mail can be very discouraging to read.
2. **It must answer all questions, and pre-empt further questions** – If you do not answer all the questions in the original email, you will receive further e-mails regarding the unanswered questions, which will not only waste your time and your customer’s time but also cause considerable frustration. Moreover, if you are able to pre-empt relevant questions, your customer will be grateful and impressed with your efficient and thoughtful customer service.

Example of non pre-emptive reply resulting in 5 replies in total:

Customer: Can you tell me where I can purchase your product?
Sales: You can purchase it from us.
Customer: How can I purchase it?
Sales: From our website.
Customer: What is the URL?
Sales: <http://www.company.com>
Customer: How can I pay?
Sales: By credit card.
Customer: Do you also accept AMEX?
Sales: No, only VISA & MasterCard

Example of pre-emptive reply resulting in 1 reply in total:

Customer: Can you tell me where I can purchase your product?
Sales: Thank you for your mail. You can purchase our product online from: <http://www.company.com>. We accept VISA and MasterCard. For your information I have attached our price list. Let me know if you have any further questions.

3. **Proper spelling, grammar & punctuation** – This is not only important because improper spelling, grammar and punctuation give a bad impression of your company, it is also important for conveying the message properly. E-mails with no full stops or commas are difficult to read and can sometimes even change the meaning of the text.

4. **It must be personal** – Not only should the e-mail be personally addressed, it should also include personal i.e. customized content. An auto-reply is useful to let the customer know that their e-mail has been received, but it should not replace the personal e-mail. Even though the answer might in essence be the same, the customer might have a different starting point that you need to incorporate in your reply.

For instance, a customer might ask for the URL of the order page. You can then send the URL and some information about ordering. Another customer might ask whether you accept Amex. In this case you would answer the question regarding Amex first and then include the standard ordering information.

5. **It must be swift** – Customers send an e-mail because they wish to receive a quick response. If they did not want a quick response they would send a letter or a fax. Therefore, each e-mail should be replied to within at least 24 hours, and preferably within the same working day.
6. **It must not contain unnecessary attachments** – By sending large attachments you can annoy customers and even bring down their e-mail system. When possible try to compress attachments and only send attachments when they are productive. Moreover, you need to have a good virus scanner in place since your customers will not be very happy if you send them documents full of viruses!
7. **It must be well structured** - Since reading from a screen is more difficult than reading from paper, the structure and lay out is very important for e-mail messages. Use short paragraphs and blank lines between each paragraph. When making points, number them or mark each point as separate to keep the overview.

A study carried out for a high street company revealed that:

The cost of handling unstructured e-mails is up to 10 times the cost of handling a phone call.

Each e-mail is estimated to take 12 minutes to respond to (18 minutes if the response is reviewed by a supervisor)

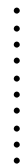
Each operator is unlikely to exceed 40 responses per day.

Email@work 2000, Jonathan Whelan

How to ensure that your employees send good e-mail replies

Keeping the above in mind, how can you make sure that your employees will send good e-mail replies? After all, it's impossible to personally read each e-mail before it gets sent out. Rest assured, there are a number of things that you can do to increase the quality of your company's e-mail replies without having to check each mail. These include:

1. **Email policy** – You can publish an internal document on how to send corporate e-mails. In this way your staff are aware of the corporate rules and guidelines so that they know what is expected of them. A policy could include the following points: expected speed of replies, corporate answering style (formal/informal), guidelines that set priority for certain e-mails, forwarding & distribution guidelines, pointers for writing good e-mail messages, etc.



2. **Email training** – To enforce your email policy you can train your employees on how to send their replies. If you want your email policy to be put into practice, an email training is a very good idea.
3. **Create & distribute standard e-mail texts** – In order to ensure consistent and good quality replies, you can create standard texts for information that needs to be sent regularly. These can then be made available to all employees for use in e-mail messages. For instance, you could save standard texts for answering questions about certain product features, order procedures, pricing, directions to your office, and any other frequently asked questions. In this way you could ensure that these texts are well written and that your staff use good quality and consistent replies, while still being able to personalize content. Furthermore, these texts can function as a knowledge base of up-to-date information on your company and products.
4. **Email management software** – The number of e-mails that companies receive is ever increasing. Since an employee only has a limited capacity to answer a certain amount of e-mails, you need tools that can help staff reply to more e-mails and do so in a shorter time span. Not only will this prevent you from having to take on more staff, it will also improve your customer service and increase your competitiveness. Remember that if your competitor is quicker than you at replying to e-mails, the customer will probably choose your competitor to purchase their product or service. You can use the following type of tools:
 - **Auto responders:** Although these can be useful to tell the customer that an e-mail has been received or to send answers to some Frequently Asked Questions, they cannot replace a personalized e-mail. Moreover, auto responders must be used sparingly as they can annoy customers if used too often.
 - **Email management packages:** These packages can keep track of e-mail, suggest possible responses, distribute e-mails among agents, produce reports on e-mail response times, etc. Although these management packages can be very powerful, they only apply to very large corporations since they require a lot of time and expertise to implement and are very costly.
 - **Email reply aids:** These programs allow companies to store their standard corporate texts so that users can use these texts in their replies. These packages are easy to implement and use and offer instant improvement in the quality and speed of email replies. An example of these Email reply aids is ReplyMate.

How ReplyMate can help your employees send good e-mail replies

ReplyMate is an email reply aid with which you can store standard e-mail texts (including attachments) and paste these into your e-mail replies. The texts are stored in a Windows Explorer type storage system, and by double-clicking on a text it is automatically pasted into your e-mail message.

Apart from saving you retyping frequently sent replies, ReplyMate cuts out another step in the email reply process: the program adds Reply, Forward, and New buttons to the Outlook toolbar. By clicking on these buttons ReplyMate will perform the appropriate function using

the text you selected. The messages can also contain merge fields such as Sender name, email address, and Outlook contact fields, saving you from entering this information yourself.

ReplyMate's shared folders give you the opportunity to directly influence the quality of your employees' email replies.

Benefits of using ReplyMate:

Using ReplyMate to answer your e-mails results in the following benefits:

1. **Improve the *quality of your replies*** - With the prewritten texts & spell checker you can minimize spelling and typing mistakes in your e-mails. Using shared folders further enables supervisors to control the quality and consistency of replies.
2. **Increase the *number of e-mails you can reply to*** - ReplyMate greatly increases the number of e-mail messages an employee can handle by eliminating costly time re-typing similar replies.

'Email has significantly increased the volume of messages handled by workers, with each person now receiving an average of 39 emails every day, up 12 from last year'.

Pitney Bowes, Messaging Practices in the Knowledge Economy 2000, July 2000.

3. **Increase the *speed at which you can reply*** - Since employees can answer their e-mails more quickly with ReplyMate, this improves your customer service and will avoid repeat-e-mails or telephone calls regarding unanswered e-mails.
4. **Improve the *effectiveness of your e-mails*** - Because you use 'stored' texts on certain subjects, you can ensure that your answer includes all relevant information in clear terms, therefore decreasing repeat e-mails.
5. **Customize the message** - Although you can use standard texts in ReplyMate, it also allows you to customize the e-mail, since each e-mail requires a personal touch.
6. **Maintain a corporate *knowledge base*** - Since ReplyMate stores all frequently used texts, this will be a source of up-to-date information on your company that employees can reference to not only when sending emails, but also while on the phone or sending out correspondence.

Conclusion

If you professionalise your e-mail communications, you will improve your company's customer service and increase your competitive advantage. Apart from personally reading every mail that leaves your company, there are other ways of doing this without requiring large investments. By using an email reply aid such as ReplyMate, together with an e-mail policy & training and a comprehensive and well-written set of corporate texts, you can ensure that your e-mail communications are professional and that your company is sending out the right 'message'.