

Smarter E-mail Subject Lines

By Randy Dean, MBA – The "Totally Obsessed" Time Management Technology Guy

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One of the most common frustrations many of my readers and program attendees mention are poor e-mail subject lines. The most mentioned "pet peeves" are e-mail subjects that are too vague and/or give you a false sense of timeliness (for example -- you have no idea there is something urgent burning inside of the e-mail due to the casual subject line.)

Here are a couple e-mail best practices that I recommend that may help your e-mails be read more quickly, acted on appropriately and timely, and appreciated more by the recipients:

1. If time sensitive, make that clear right at the start. I'm a HUGE fan of putting time requirements at the very beginning of time-sensitive e-mails. For example, if you need someone to reply by a certain date/time, make that the first text of the subject line: "NEED RESPONSE BY 3:00 P.M. TODAY -- Your Reply to Project A." (And yes, I did purposefully put that in all caps -- I'm not shouting -- I'm just making the necessary time reply completely obvious.) Less urgent: "Please Reply by Tuesday -- Your Update on Project A." Getting the urgency of the message right up front is always helpful -- appropriate identifiers can help "BY, DUE, NEED, URGENT, ASAP, PRIORITY, etc." Of course, you have to use these appropriately and not overuse them also -- if you mark everything "URGENT" or "PRIORITY" every time you send, then is anything truly urgent or priority?

2. If project/client/person specific, get those listed early in the subject line too. "Reply by Tuesday -- STEVE, Need Project A update." This subject line does three things: 1) it gives a clear "need by" date, 2) it shows that Steve is the person responsible (useful if this same message has been CC'd to others), and 3) it makes clear what project/client/activity the message is related to, *thus helping with post-action message filing (once done or tasked, get it OUT of your inbox!)*.

3. Try to get the required action in the subject line (even if not completely). I love subject lines that are "task-oriented." That means they at least give you a hint of the task that needs to be done. Thus, words like Reply, Complete, Respond, Submit, Create, Schedule, Call, Send, etc. are very helpful with making clear what action needs to be taken. Of course, the body copy helps "complete the story", giving the necessary additional information of 1) why the recipient(s) received the message; 2) what they need to know; 3) what they need to do; and 4) when they need to have it done by. I teach in my classes that this information above should be the first few sentences of any new message as well as any message that is forwarded or replied to with an expectation of a new task completion.

4. STOP using FYI. FYI drives me nuts. I think it actually stands for two things: 1) Figure it out on Your Own (I know, that doesn't really match FYI, but it is still a bit funny); or 2) For Your *Ignorement*. The vast amount of evidence suggests that many e-mail users, especially those receiving and using heavy amounts of e-mail, only give

cursory attention to and/or completely ignore FYIs. They are just too busy. Instead, how about this: "By 9/30 -- Project A -- Information You Need to Understand and Retain". This is a TASK that needs to be completed by 9/30 related to Project A -- they need to know this new information, and then find an appropriate place to keep it for later retention.

5. Use EOM and NRN! Have you ever been so clever that you fit the entire message in the subject line? Just put EOM at the end of that subject line – that stands for “End of Message” – and will tell people they don't even need to open the message. Everything is right there! (*You may want to put “End of Message” in parenthesis the first time you use this – that way they'll know what it stands for!*) And if you ever are replying to a message just to confirm receipt of a document, file, etc., try this: “File received – thanks! – NRN” NRN stands for “No Reply Necessary”. (And trust me on this – once your co-workers see EOM and NRN, they'll start using them too!)

I know this is just a brief starter on effective subject lines – get the date required up front, list the projects/people/clients etc. next, and get at least part of the needed action all into the subject, while ending the FYI Insanity. I'm sure that many of you are also doing some other things with your subject lines -- please share with me some of your subject line best practices at timelyman@gmail.com, and I'll post the best ideas in a future issue of Timely Tips.

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