Effective Email Strategies for Law Students and Lawyers

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Why Do Law Students Need Advice on Using Email?

While most of you have been using email for as long as you can remember, communicating as a lawyer (or future lawyer) carries some unique obligations and responsibilities. Employers, clients, deans, faculty, and licensing agencies all have an interest in how you present yourself publicly. As a savvy legal professional, using email effectively can help you cultivate a reputation for integrity and strong communication skills. Conversely, thoughtless blunders can damage not only your own reputation, but that of colleagues, co-workers, employers, and clients. By taking the same level of care with your personal correspondence that you would with your motions and briefs, you can solidify your professional persona.

Getting Started

As a new legal professional, it is worthwhile to take a moment to reconsider some of the email strategies you used in your pre-law school days.

- *First Impressions Count!* Make sure that your email address supports a professional identity and clearly identifies you. Smartlawyer@gmail.com might be an accurate description, but it does not help a prospective employer identify which smart lawyer you are. Similarly, addresses like partygirl@gmail.com do not support the professional brand that you have worked so hard to create. Try using a simple formulation that incorporates your first and last name.
- *Getting in the Last Word.* If you utilize a signature block at the end of your message, keep it simple. At a minimum, include your name and phone number. If you choose to list your degree, do so accurately. Verify whether your school awards a "Juris Doctor" or "Doctor of Jurisprudence." Very few of you will be earning a "Juris Doctorate." Listing your credentials inaccurately does not inspire confidence.

  Think twice before adding a quote to the end of your signature block. This is not your high school yearbook; consider whether you really want every employer, professor, and mentor to know "what a long, strange trip it's been." Similarly, if you choose to insert links to your blog, website, Facebook page, or Twitter feed, be fully prepared to have your correspondents follow them. Directing new readers to your online content could be an excellent opportunity to build your "brand" or personal identity by showcasing your professional expertise, or an opportunity to harm your reputation if these communications are less than professional in tone and content.
- *Effective Email Management.* Sometimes knowing when NOT to use email is the best email strategy. When dealing with sensitive subject matter or seeking significant amounts of information, it is time to abandon email in favor of face-to-face conversations or other strategies.
- *Start with the Conclusion.* If you are asking your reader to do something, start the message with the request for action and then use the remainder of the message to explain why. If you put the request at the end, your recipient is likely to miss it. If your message is lengthy, summarize the contents of the message with a few bullet points at the beginning.

Online Etiquette

There are a few basic rules of the road for effective email etiquette; these become particularly important to observe when communicating through email discussion lists and groups. Demonstrating online etiquette will help you earn the good will of others while ignoring it could damage your reputation in a very public way.

- *To "cc" or Not to "cc"?* Consider who needs to receive your message, and include them (and only them). Do not use "reply all" when a direct response to the sender is more appropriate. Similarly, if you are communicating via an email group or discussion list, do not clog up everyone's inbox with a message that simply says "me too."
- *Unintended Audiences.* Be judicious about forwarding messages from others, but assume that your email messages will ALWAYS be forwarded. Once you hit

"send" you lose control over the distribution of your message. If you do not want your message forwarded to your law school dean or law firm partner, do not send it. Many unwary law students have been surprised to see their email messages reprinted on a legal industry blog or on the front page of a legal newspaper.

- *What Are We Talking About?* If you are carrying on a lengthy email conversation, be sure to change the subject line to match the content of the messages.

Special Considerations for Law Students and Lawyers

You Are Not "Dear Abby." As a member of the legal profession, you must take extra care with any information you offer — if it rises to the level of legal advice, you may have inadvertently created an attorney-client relationship with your correspondent. Avoid providing legal advice via email, especially on email discussion lists and groups.

There Are No Secrets on Email. Email is inherently an insecure medium. Refrain from using email to communicate information that must remain confidential.

Do Not Use Work Email for Personal Use. Do not use your work email account for personal business. Your employer owns the email account and the information contained therein. Your use of a work email account will inadvertently create the impression that your employer has endorsed the message you are communicating. Many employers would consider using work email for personal business to be a misappropriation of company resources, especially if used for financial gain or political activity.

You Are Your Word. Bar associations and many employers conduct background checks to assess your character and fitness. Any "bad behavior" in email is likely to find its way to the investigators and could derail your opportunities.

Email and Your Job Search

Tone Counts! When the only information a prospective employer knows about you is contained in the 50 words of your email message, those words take on extra importance. Having a professional-sounding email is as effective in creating a positive impression as wearing a business suit to a job interview. Respond promptly to an employer's requests for information. Make sure your tone is polite, your text is grammatically correct, and your thoughts are well-composed. Do not use emoticons, exclamation marks, ALL CAPS, and informal constructions.

Who? What? If you are submitting an application for a job via email, be sure that your email address clearly identifies who you are and that the subject line identifies the position you are seeking (e.g., "Application for Real Estate Associate"). If you are requesting an informational interview, use the subject line to identify your connection to the person (e.g., "Colleague of John Smith").

Supporting Documents. When attaching your resume and other application materials, convert them to PDFs to preserve your careful formatting and to ensure that the recipient can open them. Provide the documents with logical names (e.g., "Mary Jones Resume").

By using email in a thoughtful and strategic manner, you can use it as an effective tool to creating and maintaining your professional persona.