

Best Negotiating Practices®

How to Harness the Power and Avoid the Pitfalls of Negotiating over Email

In our consulting and training practice, we're often asked if the *Best Negotiating Practices*® developed for face-to-face bargaining are applicable to your negotiations over email. The answer is absolutely, but like all things there is more to it than meets the eye. When using email to advance your negotiations, you'll want to factor in these considerations and incorporate effective strategies.

The Good and the Bad

The benefits of e-mail negotiating are fairly obvious. For one, screen-to-screen communications typically provoke less stress because reaction time isn't immediately an issue. Using the contemplation time allowed by e-mail is a welcome advantage. In contrast, face-to-face makes it easier for some personality types to get lured into explosive responses or hurried and unwise trades.

High on the list of pros for e-mail negotiating are the savings that come from eliminating the time and cost associated with travel. Companies often find it pays to make the initial trip that lays the foundation for future e-mail negotiations. From there, much of the follow through no longer needs to occur face-to-face.

Research comparing e-mail, telephone and face-to-face negotiating methods demonstrates that e-mail can be an obstacle toward gaining the trust and cooperation essential for successful negotiations. Face-to-face negotiations typically end in mutually beneficial agreements, with less than 10% ending in impasse. With telephone, the most common result is agreement, yet with one side taking a greater share of the profits. E-mail negotiations, however, are more likely to arrive at an impasse, with only half resulting in agreement.

Why this essential tool of communication inhibits negotiations is not so obvious:

- Research shows there is a greater tendency to lie or exaggerate with email. There is also more bluffing and intimidating threats. Hardball negotiators feel more powerful behind the screen, and less concerned about their counterpart's reaction.
- Negotiators don't feel the pressure of "live performance" and thus there tends to be less preparation, especially in reacting to offers.
- Obviously it is more difficult to build rapport and trust, but as a result, there is less focus on

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- interests and more on positions and demands.
- Communication challenges arise easily, including rudeness, ambiguous messages, and ill-conceived reactions.
 - It is easier to say “No”, and brainstorming is not comfortable, thus cramping creativity and the likelihood of value creation.

Because of these downsides, email negotiations can more easily degenerate into unpleasant exchanges, hurt rather than build relationships, and result in big concessions without trades. Yet, our use of email to negotiate is ubiquitous, so we need effective strategies to ensure those discussions result in mutually beneficial agreements.

Most Appropriate Uses

Success with e-mail negotiating depends largely on how it’s used. It makes the most sense during the stage of a deal when a message is least likely to be misconstrued. Remember, the recipient’s interpretation of a message’s tone, attitude and meaning carries far more weight than the sender’s intent.

E-mail is also used as a practical negotiating tool when dealing with more effortless deals, thereby saving face-to-face for more complex issues. For example, negotiating MRO (maintenance, repair, and operations supplies) electronically makes a lot more sense than arranging bids from three different competitors to build rocket engines.

Effective Strategies

You can improve success with e-mail negotiating by following these guidelines:

- **Meet upfront.** The first meeting is instrumental in terms of establishing rapport. It gives everyone the chance to observe expressions and gestures, and gauge likability. Web-conferencing can work, but meet face-to-face if possible, especially for complex agreements.
- **Continue to build rapport.** Over the course of emailing, express emotion as you would in person, especially positive ones (e.g., excitement, confidence, hopefulness). When trouble brews, articulate sincere concern rather than anger. It helps to reiterate how the relationship, especially if it has been a positive experience. Even a simple opening greeting and sign-off, as we naturally do in face-to-face meetings, can go a long way in maintaining essential rapport.
- **Have a well-established goal.** Think of negotiating as communicating with a goal in mind. Share your expectations, *and* when you think things have gone awry. Always know the minimum and maximum parameters that make agreement worthwhile for your side, and return to those before responding to offers via email.
- **Brainstorm offline.** Email does not usually spark creativity like the back and forth of live conversation. When a solution is not apparent, schedule a phone call or in-person meeting to get the idea train moving.
- **Stamp out conflict.** When rudeness is encountered, or you are angry, don’t respond immediately and don’t respond in kind. Instead, take a short break, and then contact your counterpart by phone, or email a simple statement of concern and

schedule a face-to-face meeting as soon as possible. Conflict with emotional intensity is rarely ever resolved over email.

- **Ask more questions, not less.** There is a tendency to limit your questions over email because it appears tedious. Don't fall into this trap. To avoid lengthy and exhausting lists, start with broad questions, intersperse phone conversations to discuss the answers, and use shorter emails to group follow-up questions by topic.
- **Keep the climate positive.** Maintain a friendly tone in emails. Interpret e-mail messages with caution and sensitivity, and leave room for personality, style and cultural differences. Make sure to clarify any ambiguities right away. And remember to use generally accepted best practices in email etiquette.

- **Sprinkle in the personal touch.** Share something personal, even if it's trite. It's easy to find common ground when everyone looks for it. Examples include references to the weather, sports, animals, children and travel.

There's no turning back

Business professionals use e-mail to further the overall negotiating and decision-making process. While most negotiators recognize that e-mail is less successful or more frustrating in certain situations, they use it indiscriminately. Email as a mode for conducting negotiations works best when its drawbacks are neutralized as much as possible, and negotiating power is harnessed from all the right sources...■

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