

LIVING

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Sign-off the times

When it comes to ending your e-mails, a few words can mean so much, writes **Lola Ogunnaike**

Negotiating the lease on a building he owns, Chad Troutwine knew things were going wrong when the e-mail exchanges with his prospective tenant took a turn for the worse. The giveaway was the sign-off. "As negotiations started to break down, the sign-offs started to get decidedly shorter and cooler," says Troutwine. "In the beginning it was 'I look forward to speaking with you soon' and 'Warmest regards', and by the end it was just 'Best'."

What's in an e-mail sign-off? A lot, apparently. Those final few words above your name are where relationships and hierarchies are established, and where what's written in the body of the message can be clarified or undermined.

In the days before electronic communication, the formalities of a letter were well established, from "Sincerely" to "Yours truly" to "Love". But e-mail is a casual medium, and the conventions are

still evolving. It's common for rapid-fire correspondence to move from formal to intimate in a short time. Although salutations that begin messages can be tricky - there's a world of difference, it seems, between a "Hi", a "Hello" and a "Dear" - the sign-off is the place where many writers attempt to express themselves, even in cases when expressing personality, as in business correspondence, isn't always welcome. It's a minefield.

Hong Kong Baptist University management lecturer Sue Chui says about 70 per cent of e-mail writers don't think about the impression they want to make. "A common practice in Hong Kong is to omit the sign-off altogether. This takes away the courtesy and doesn't leave room for the receiver to have their interpretation of the rapport or the message."

Chui says it's important to avoid being too casual in your use of language when you're expected to project a professional image. She says using "cheers" or "cheerio" can often be perceived as overfamiliar with someone you don't know.

"Many people aren't clear communicators," says Judith Kallos, author of *Because Netiquette Matters* and creator of NetManners.com, a site dedicated to online etiquette. To be clear about the message, "the reader is left looking at everything, from the greeting to the closing, for clues", she says.

Troutwine isn't alone in thinking that an e-mail sender who writes "Best", then a name, is offering something close to a brush-off. He uses business sign-offs in a descending order of cordiality, from "Warmest regards" to "All the best" to a curt "Sincerely".

When Kim Bondy, a former CNN executive, e-mailed a suitor after a dinner date, she used one of her preferred closings: "Chat soon." It was her way of saying, "The date went well, let's do it again," she says. She might have been the only one who thought that. The return

message closed with the dreaded "Best". It left her feeling as though she'd misread the evening. "I felt like, 'Oh, that's kind of formal. I don't think he liked me'," she says. "A chill came with the 'Best'." They haven't gone out since.

"Best" does have its fans, especially in the workplace, where it can be an all-purpose step up in warmth from messages that end with no sign-off at all, just the sender coolly appending his or her name. "I use 'Best' for all of my professional e-mails," says Kelly Brady, a publicist in New York. "It's friendly, quick and to the point."

People read so much into a sign-off, says Richard Kirshenbaum, chief creative officer of the advertising firm Kirshenbaum Bond & Partners, so he carefully chose the one he uses for work: "Warmly, RK". He didn't want something too emotional, such as "Love", or too formal, such

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Judith Kallos, online etiquette adviser

as "Sincerely". "Using 'Warmly' falls comfortably in between," he says. "I want to convey warmth and passion, but also be appropriate."

Which is just what a professional e-mail message should be, many executives say. Surprisingly, the sign-off "xoxo", offering hugs and kisses, has become common in the workplace. Bondy, who received from 300 to 500 e-mail messages a day at CNN, was no fan of the "xoxo" farewell, especially when it came from a stranger pitching a story idea. "They're trying to be warm and familiar when they shouldn't be," she says. "It's inappropriate, and that's probably the e-mail I'm not going to return."

Robert Verdi, a fashion stylist and a host of *Surprise by Design*, a makeover reality show on the Discovery Channel, is a self-described "xoxo offender". "Never in the first or second communication,"

he says. But after a few friendly phone calls or e-mail exchanges, he feels comfortable with the sign-off, although he generally waits for the other party to make the first move. "The other person gives you the cues," he says. "They send a 'You're the best! Love, Alison', and you send a 'Hugs and kisses' and all of a sudden you're over that awkward hump and you're best friends."

Kallos says Verdi's approach is the correct one. "In business you want to maintain the highest level of formality until the other person indicates otherwise," she says. "Mirroring isn't a bad thing to do. You're letting the other side set the level of familiarity."

It's also important that the closing is in keeping with the spirit of the message, says Mary Mitchell, author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Etiquette*. "If you're complaining to a company about a product and

you sign off with 'Warmly', you're miscommunicating," she says.

Many e-mail users don't bother with a sign-off, and Baldrige finds that annoying. "It's so abrupt and unfriendly," she says.

It's important not to have too much fun with sign-offs, Baldrige says. She recalls a closing from a man in his early 20s: "Don't let the bedbugs bite".

"It was 'so pedestrian and boring and such an unattractive image to leave with people," she says.

And that, Mitchell says, is a major problem with e-mail correspondence. "On the one hand, e-mail encourages people to write. On the other, it discourages people from writing thoughtfully."

The New York Times

Additional reporting by Susan Schwartz



Illustration: Stephen Case

When your Best is not good enough

Hong Kong Baptist University management lecturer Sue Chui suggests using these sign-offs in business e-mails.

- First contact (formal)**
Best regards, Sincerely, Cordially
- First contact (not so formal)**
Warmest regards, Warm regards, Regards
- Regular interaction with clients or business partners**
Warm wishes, Best, All the best, Wishing you all the best, Many thanks, Appreciate your kindness
- Regular internal communication (with superiors)**
Best regards, Warm regards
- Regular internal communication (with equals and subordinates)**
All the best, Cheers, Cheerio, See You, Good luck

Signposts: Waiting games

Michelle Gabbe
Writing thank-you notes can be one of those annoying chores you always put off. Imagine having to write more than 100 of them for wedding guests. The more you're nagged to do it, the less motivated you feel.

I rarely ask clients why they avoid doing something. Instead, I focus on how many strategies we can devise to get the task done. The following approaches might be helpful.

Deflate the task
Is the undertaking too overwhelming even to contemplate? When I asked a client recently for his best example of procrastination, he replied: "I need to improve the workplace environment for my staff." The workplace environment encompasses so much. Would he suggest a more casual dress code, replace metal stools with ergonomically designed seating, or create more transparent job descriptions? He realised that, even though the idea had been in his head for months, he wasn't sure what

the overall solution was. He was sure that the longer he put it off, the more intimidating the task would become. Once we outlined what was to be done specifically, and planned manageable steps to achieve this, his worry was replaced with enthusiasm.

Lower the height of the hurdle
That unfiled pile of documents behind your home office chair has become a precarious tower just barely concealed by the desktop - scary, but not insurmountable.

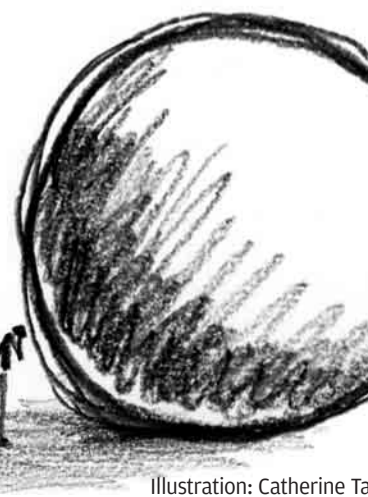


Illustration: Catherine Tai

If your favourite music was playing, and a hot aromatic bubble bath was running, couldn't you commit to tackling that pile bit by bit at the end of each day until it was gone?

Become aware of your resources
Is there anyone in your life who might be willing to help you? Look beyond passing chores to your spouse. A former colleague of mine was strict about keeping a tidy work area and embraced the adage "a cluttered desk reflects a cluttered mind". She looked forward to the annual office cleanup day. What if the client earlier had asked his employees what changes would enhance their office the most? Consider getting an accountability partner. Telling a friend or colleague about your intentions to complete a much-delayed chore, and knowing they're awaiting the news of your success, makes it far more likely to happen. Reciprocate by offering to hold that person accountable for something they've been meaning to accomplish.

Create time
If your excuse for not getting things done is that you haven't got time,

spend a week becoming aware of how much time you allow for everyday tasks. Write it all down, including time spent chastising yourself for all the stuff you feel you should have but didn't get done the day before. The idea isn't to cast a critical eye on your inefficiencies, but to increase your awareness of how your life is playing out in real time. It might come as a shock to realise that you check your work e-mail 48 times before lunch, on average, or that you routinely mentally revise sent messages in 10 different ways.

Make it a priority anyway
Perhaps your internal judge has decided that your unaccomplished task isn't worthy of your attention. For some of us, important tasks get subconsciously, but consistently, pushed to the bottom of the to-do pile. Why is an appointment with the reflexologist less important than driving your husband's car to the car wash? If you're expecting someone else to give you permission to prioritise yourself, you might just be the one you've been waiting for.

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Vet's casebook: Leash the cat

Is it possible to train my cat to walk on a leash?

That depends on your cat. Some are relaxed about being taken outside, but others will have a blue fit. If your cat is of the former disposition, you may be able to train it to walk on a leash. It's easier to train young kittens, although it's not impossible to get an older cat to eventually enjoy leash walking.

Cats don't behave the same way as dogs do on a leash: most won't wander alongside you, but rather stop to explore their surroundings much more. It won't be an exercise opportunity for you - more a chance for your cat to safely explore the outdoors and experience a new and stimulating environment. Living in Hong Kong, it's irresponsible to allow your cat outdoors unsupervised - there are very real threats of traffic, toxins, diseases, cat-hating people and even wild dogs or snakes in rural areas.

Be patient. Leash training can take many weeks to accomplish. Get a special H-style harness. Cats' necks are too fragile for leads attached to collars, and they can easily slip out of them. The harness should sit in front of and behind the front legs. The leash should be about 160cm long - any longer and the cat may be too far out

of reach in case of danger. Ask a good pet shop for help.

Cats are sensitive and intelligent creatures. Forcing them to do something is unproductive, so be patient and gentle. Show your cat what you want it to do and reward it with tasty treats. This is known as positive reinforcement. Start out by slipping the harness on loosely and reward it with its favourite food. Take the harness off after five to 10 minutes, and repeat this procedure two to three times each day. Once it's comfortable moving around with the harness on, attach the leash and reward acceptance.

The next step is teaching your cat to walk on the leash. Move one step forward, gently pull on the leash and show the treat to your cat. If it follows, reward it. You need to repeat this a few times each day. When the cat consistently follows and responds to tugs on the leash with praise and rewards, you can move on.

Then comes walking outdoors. Some environments may be too scary for your cat, with

traffic noise, other people and animals about, so choose somewhere quiet and peaceful such as an enclosed yard or garden, and don't push it. Keep the cat close at hand so you can grab it if necessary. If it's fearful, don't insist on making it walk outdoors. Walk slowly, let it smell flowers, watch birds, stop and start. If you make this a fun exercise, your cat may end up looking forward to walks with enthusiasm.

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