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# Email Will Never Be The Same – All Dressed Up and Everywhere To Go

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*By Richard L. Upton*

*Forward by Gerry Riskin of Edge International*

*Richard Upton is a savvy guru to the professions – he comes from the creative side but he understands and serves major law firms. In this piece, Richard helps us understand that an individual’s professional email has the potential to be more useful and friendly to the recipient and therefore a much more powerful tool to the firm that uses it. Somehow after seeing this, email simply seems undressed (or perhaps under-dressed). Give this some thought in your organization. If you want to explore this further, contact Richard directly (see his email address at the end of the piece).*

**T**ELL THE TRUTH. HAS email improved your life? As a business leader, can you honestly say that you, your organization and your employees are more productive, or less, because you can send and receive instantaneous communications, day or night, from anywhere in the world? Do you have more time to devote to important matters, or less?

I know what the answer was supposed to be. Just a few years ago—when people were so ga-ga about email that they affixed happy-face icons to their messages—email was going to make everything in our workday lives easier,

faster and more efficient. Instead, we find ourselves more “time-famished,” as I like to call it, than ever before. Executives typically receive 100 or more emails per day. Some of us spend as much as four hours each day just managing the volume of email, with no let-up in sight. (Forty-one percent of Americans surveyed last year by America Online/Opinion Research said they check their email before going to work; 4 percent check their messages in the bathroom.)

Fortunately, the challenge of protecting ourselves from these relentless demands on our time can and will be met, but only by companies that

approach this challenge with innovative thinking. It is my opinion that the solution to the most vexing problems we face in our technology-enabled economy is to be found in the way we think about them—whether, that is, we view them as we have for the past decade or in new and fresh ways, responding accordingly. (The phrase *paradigm shift* has been overused in recent years, but in this case it may really be the best choice.)

The burden of excessive email and the time pressures it places on us, after all, is only one example of a business-communications process not keeping pace with the needs of contemporary business. It is an especially urgent one, however. It also allows us to explore the ways in which the problems that we must solve also represent opportunities that we can seize.

Consider this. The volume of business emails alone—more than 200 billion in 2006—will surpass the total number of items of mail of *all kinds* delivered this year by the US Postal Service. Think about it.

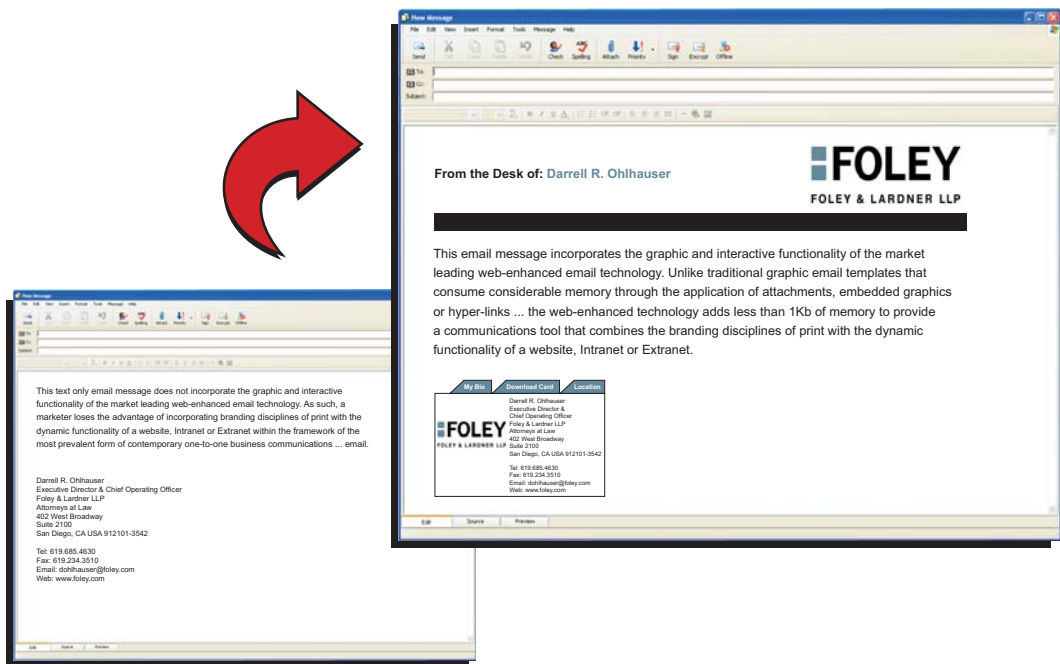
Every piece of correspondence that your organization turns over to the letter carrier—every sheet of paper and the envelope it goes in—has been very carefully designed to represent your company, right? You've taken great pains, and spent a pretty penny on graphic designers, to get it to look just right. It represents your company; it carries your brand. But how many of us have given anywhere near the same care to the emails we send, although these vastly exceed in volume the number of

pieces of paper that issue forth from our mailrooms?

The vast majority of us haven't even bothered to make our emails comply with the basic structure of even the most rudimentary business letter—and the issue here goes well beyond mere aesthetics. We have not done so, I believe, because we fundamentally misunderstand the nature of e-communications and for that reason, rather than our controlling our email, our email controls us.

Most business leaders persist in viewing email as a technology tool when, in fact, it is a medium of communication and actually the most powerful and prevalent one we have. But because we regard email as information technology, we have relegated it to our IT departments, where it remains today.

Now IT departments perform many functions exceedingly well, but we would never think of turning over finance, human resources or marketing responsibilities to our IT departments simply because these departments rely heavily on technology, too.



And because we have failed to see email as the dynamic communications media that it is, we routinely underestimate its capacity to transform our lives for the better and, yes, to give us more rather than less time for the things in our personal and professional lives that matter most. By viewing email as a technology extension, it becomes another complex “black box” that we assume is off limits to being made better – an assumption we would never make regarding other branding or marketing tools that we understand well. I have found few business leaders who appreciate what email can really accomplish. Too many don't understand, to offer but one powerful example, that email can become the permanent (and endlessly updated) repository for the transmission and storage of vital company data, tailored to individual clients, customers, partners—you name it.

Let's take the example of a financial-services company. An email sent by one of its investment advisors to one of its customers could include all of the company's distinct branding elements, its logo, sender's personal

contact information and relevant website links. Even more impressive, however, is the fact that these elements can be added without increasing an e-mail's "weight" and without making it more complex or time-consuming to the sender or recipient.

Also, there's no need for embedded graphics or attachments. As a further example, through the use of "dynamic functionality," this email can also provide real customer value by including relevant financial service information, like interest rates that change in real time, as market conditions dictate.

Finally, because it is updated automatically, this email can include real-time information no matter how long ago it was sent or when it is opened. Thus, this one email becomes the financial-services company's chief means of communication with that customer. This one email can also become this one customer's sole source of such information—the only one he

or she needs. Suddenly, it is no longer necessary to save the bulk of old emails; the information is kept current automatically. Instead of being inert, as it is today, the data becomes active.

The cumbersome process of *cancel-and-replace* is now totally obsolete, and all of us will be better off for it. We will have more impact with our message, more control of our lives and more certainty of our time.

We will also have crossed a threshold in our understanding of technology and our use of it that is difficult to exaggerate. The trap we that have fallen into—understandable enough, considering how intimidated many of us can be by technology—is to have allowed technology to make us alter our behavior when we should have required technology to adapt to ours. That can and must change. With a more dynamic understanding of email and, ultimately, of all e-communications, we can begin to regain control of our lives. Technology can

again be made our servant rather than our master. Forward thinking organizations can already see the possibilities that this offers. If our companies do the same, the time we save will be our own.



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