Safeguarding Client Relationships: Internal and External Emails

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Abstract. Business communications regarding a specific matter between clients and within the organization occur regularly and concurrently. Though Real Time Communication (RTC) tools such as Zoom, Teams and Slack are popular for internal communication, emails remain the primary mode of communication for concurrent internal and external communication. It is important to be vigilant of etiquette and professionalism in such communication. The following case study documents a professionally embarrassing incident at a for-profit learning institution where the private communication between two administrators overlapped, or "co-mingled," with that of a parent. Because one of the administrators made a casual comment about the parent with the other school official, the parent was subsequently able to read the negative comment. Our case study highlights the critical need for vigilant separation of internal and external emailing to avoid such professionally embarrassing incidents, thus providing a valuable lesson for educational institutions and business organizations alike.

Keywords: business communications, organizational management, customer service.

1. Introduction

Effective communication informs daily successes and failures in every organization. Organizations should take great effort in ensuring that their communications, both internally and externally, maintain accurate information, etiquette, and a professional voice, pitch, tone, inflection, articulation, pace and volume.[2] However, individuals oftentimes inadvertently adopt a less formal tone by employing more casual language, thus neglecting the conventions associated with formal business prose style. For example, when an organization

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1. Authors' Note: It should be noted that this case study is based on real events and communications. However the names of the parties and entities involved have been changed and the actual text of the correspondences have been lightly edited for publication reasons.
2. Jameson, D. A. (2004), "Conceptualizing the writer-reader relationship in business prose", *The Journal of Business Communication* (1973), 41(3), 227-264. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021943604265953.

communicates with a client, the client expects the language to be professional and amicable. Internal conversations can take on a more casual or even negative tone. This shift in tone can be problematic, if, by mistake, an employee unintentionally sends an internal message to a client. It can erode the trust between the organization and the client. Professional and/or industry communications should meet a consistent standard, despite that fact that "[i]nternal and external mail are typically very different in tone, style and delivery methods".[3]

Although technology is offering newer ways to communicate, emails are still the main mode for internal and external communications and still tend to be the "most heavily used medium" of communications in business organizations.[4] Work emails can however "escalate anger" and "reduce productivity."[5] Possibly business organizations now lean toward using instant messaging services for internal communication over emails. However, many organizations in general still prefer emails due to convenience, security, and instant notification. Zoom, Teams, and Slack and related mediums, often referred to as Real-Time Communication (RTC)[6] have emerged, but emails or legacy communication forms will likely continue to be the main form of communication between organizations and their clients, especially at the initial stages of communication, until a mutually agreeable platform is established. Although instant messaging platforms[7] now offer features for archiving messages, email remains constant and trusted. Emails then, especially external ones, can be "regarded as a public relations message"[8] to external audiences. Internal emails, on the other hand, are understood to be private, or non-public, and therefore in the workplace, both employers and employees may adopt a more casual or less guarded communication style when messaging, as such communications typically do not necessitate meticulous consideration of content and tone. After all, internal messaging is often believed to be private and not intended for client perusal.

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