



8 Tips for Successful Email Negotiation

By Thomas Wood

Email may well now be the dominant form of business communication, and increasingly unavoidable in negotiations. It has its advantages -- it saves money and time, allows you to ask questions that might be more difficult in person, and sometimes reduces stress because of the time allowed for contemplation and reaction. So why do half of email negotiations end in impasse?

Negotiating by email has pitfalls too many negotiators ignore. Research shows that negotiators experience less satisfaction with the process, less rapport, and less future trust in their partners. Why?

- There is a greater tendency to lie, exaggerate, bluff, or intimidate with email.
- Negotiators don't feel the pressure of "live performance," and thus often prepare less.
- Because it is more difficult to build rapport and trust, there is often less focus on interests and more on positions and demands.
- Communication challenges arise easily, including rudeness, ambiguous messages, misinterpretations, and ill-conceived reactions.
- It is easier to say "no" and brainstorming is not possible, thus cramping creativity and the likelihood of value creation.

Because of these downsides, email negotiations can inhibit the trust and mutual understanding that builds and sustains rapport, so conflicts or misunderstandings can easily degenerate or worsen. Here are 8 tips for maximizing the value of email and minimizing the risk:

1. **Meet first.** The first meeting is critical to establishing rapport. It gives everyone the chance to observe expressions and gestures, gauge likeability, style, and personality. Web-conferencing can work, but meet face-to-face if possible, especially for complex agreements.
2. **Continue to build rapport.** Over the course of emailing, express emotions as you would in person, especially positive ones (e.g., excitement, confidence, hopefulness. 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. Make "small talk" or "small text" as you naturally do in face-to-face conversations, before you get into the meat of your message. "Hope all is well." "Were you hit by that tropical storm last week?" "Did your daughter's team win their game?"
3. **Have a well-established goal.** Think of negotiating as communicating with a goal in mind. Beware of stream of consciousness negotiation on key deal points. 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.
4. **Brainstorm offline.** Email does not usually spark or encourage 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 ideas moving.
5. **Stamp out conflict.** If an email comes off as rigid, or rude, it may be unintentional. Don't respond immediately and don't respond in kind. Take a short break, then contact your counterpart by phone, or email a simple statement of concern or desire to clarify. If

there is a problem, pick up the phone or schedule a face-to-face meeting as soon as possible. Conflict with emotional intensity is rarely solved over email.

6. **Ask more questions, not less.** There is a tendency to limit 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.
7. **Keep the climate positive.** Maintain a friendly tone in emails -- use emoticons, 🙌 😊 (but don't over use), if it feels friendly. Interpret email messages with caution and sensitivity, and leave room for personality, style, and cultural differences. Make sure to clarify any ambiguities right away, and use generally accepted best practices in email etiquette.
8. **Sprinkle in the personal touch.** Share or ask something personal to connect with the other side -- even if it's only about the weather or a local team. Or look for other areas of common interest (try checking Linked In) and asking open-ended questions. Once you've found out their interests, send them URL's or articles that they might find interesting. Avoid religion or politics, though!

Business professionals continue to use email to further the negotiating and decision-making process, despite its drawbacks, so there's no avoiding it. Just use it carefully! And smile as you type. 😊

Visit Watershed's *Negotiator's Learning Center* to read more on [Negotiating Over Email](#).



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Negotiating Tip

Be sincerely curious and ask three questions after their offer. Listen as an ally! This will tell you how legitimate they think their offer is.

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