

Zen & The Art of Legal Networking

INSIGHTS & COMMENTARY ON RELATIONSHIP BUILDING WITHIN THE INTERNATIONAL LAWYERS NETWORK

PUBLISHED BY

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Posted at 7:15 AM on July 28, 2010 by Lindsay Griffiths

Uh Oh: My Email Was Misinterpreted. What Now?

I like to think that I have a good sense of humor and believe that there is room for friendliness in a professional relationship. But I'll admit to being surprised, and not in a good way, when after sending a thank you email to an events planner I'm working with, I got this response: "Always at your service, mylady[sic]."¹ I've only been conversing with this person for a couple of months, and we certainly are not at that level of friendliness (although, as a friend of mine pointed out, a comment like this really only would have been appropriate had I signed off on my email "Until the morrow, my lord.").



But all joking aside, most of my Facebook friends agreed that this crossed the line. It inspired [Christine Pilch's post "Avoiding inappropriateness to safeguard your brand,"](#) where she makes this important point (see her full post for the second example):

"Both of the above examples were likely innocent mistakes, however they illustrate how easy it is to damage your reputation by simply crossing a line. Your reputation is very closely intertwined with your brand, which is a reflection of your constituency's perception of you. To illustrate my point, consider how BP's reputation over the past 3-months has affected their brand."

Your brand is critical, so be careful to avoid any inappropriateness that could potentially damage it. Resist the temptation to be cute because it might not be perceived that way on the other end."

And it turns out perception is the key. I saw this morning, thanks to a tweet from [Guy Kawasaki](#), that [only a little over 50% of people](#) interpret the tone of emails *correctly*.

That's right - **50%**.

That's a pretty scary statistic, especially when you consider that 90% *think* they are interpreting the tone correctly and 80% of writers think that their tone is clear.

As Christine suggests in her post, that leaves a lot up to chance and personalities, which is unsettling when you're talking about your brand - and make no mistake, **every** communication that you have, whether by email, phone, in person, or via the social webs, reflects on your brand.

To me, the lesson is the same as Christine's, to be more careful in your emails. But it also got me thinking, what should you do if an email is misinterpreted? Because Christine was right in saying that this events planner's reputation has been damaged in my opinion - how could he have made it right?

I think most often, when an email is misinterpreted as being offensive, it's ignored. But in my case, I did send him an email shortly afterwards, asking him to keep our communications professional, so he had the heads up that I was upset. Unfortunately, I got no response.

Had he called me immediately (or at least at some point yesterday), to apologize and explain that it was just his sense of humor, things would have been smoothed over. Had he even just quickly emailed me back to apologize and say it would never happen again, I would feel differently. But he just left my email unanswered, and that says to me as the client "I don't care about your feelings."

And that translates to "I don't care about your business."

In a service business like we are in (both lawyers and legal marketers), [customer service matters](#). Mistakes happen; they're a natural part of life, and we're all human. But "[I'm sorry](#)" goes a long way in showing your clients that you care about their business.

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