



Michael Mino is president and CEO of PropertyBoss Solutions, a provider of property management software solutions that empower your business. He became a landlord in 1977 when he purchased his first rental unit. A serial entrepreneur, he has started a number of software technology firms. For more information about Michael or PropertyBoss Solutions, visit propertyboss.com or call Michael at 864-297-7661 x 26.

Successful E-mail Strategies

Have you ever received an e-mail that seemed to yell at you? Annoying, isn't it? Electronic mail (e-mail) has become an integral part of business communication, but it is often treated casually, with less thought than most telephone conversations.

Your e-mail messages represent you and your business, replacing many of the traditional memos, letters and telephone conversations. Think of the care you took the first time you wrote a cover letter for your resume or negotiated with a business client. What do you want your e-mail messages to communicate to your clients, suppliers and coworkers? If you rely on e-mail daily for your business, it may be time to consider how it can work for you:

- Develop a plan and policy for business use of your e-mail system.
- Implement procedures to support your policies.
- Enhance your use of e-mail to improve your business.

DEVELOP AN E-MAIL PLAN AND POLICY

Know what you are dealing with first. Evaluate how you and your staff use e-mail for your business:

- What types of e-mail messages are received and sent? Who receives them and how do they respond? For example, who receives and who processes marketing and sales e-mails? Sales inquiries require a different approach than billing and maintenance issues.
- How many e-mail messages are received and sent daily? Processing high volumes of messages consumes time.
- What is the nature of the e-mails received? Time-sensitive messages should be identified quickly. Critical or sensitive information needs to get to the correct individual. Junk or spam should be isolated and disposed of.

THINK ABOUT YOUR BUSINESS IMAGE

Professional communication is key to a successful business. When sending a letter to a client, you use company letterhead with standard business letter formatting to project a professional image. Do your

e-mail messages reflect the same professional business attitude? By developing e-mail guidelines, you can direct the e-mail process for you and your staff. Some points to consider include:

- Your e-mail address: Does your domain name reflect your business or someone else's business? You directed a lot of attention in selecting your business name. Consider selecting a descriptive domain name. JohnSmith8095@aol.com doesn't convey the same image as JohnSmith@ResidentialRentals.com.
- Use the "Subject:" line to identify yourself and your topic. It is the first information your recipient sees, and draws them in for what is included in the body of your message.
- Your greeting and closing set the tone. Do you prefer a formal or informal tone? While a variety of greetings may be used, often, a standard closing format is selected. You can create an electronic signature or business card in most e-mail systems. What do you choose to include? Name or signature, job title, company name, address, telephone and fax numbers, website link and/or company logo? A confidentiality disclaimer can also be included.
- For the text of your e-mails, use basic business writing skills. Do not use CAPITAL letters, which are interpreted as shouting, and avoid the use of acronyms such as LOL (Laughing Out Loud). When available, take advantage of spelling and grammar check to catch typographical errors.
- If your topic is of a confidential or personal nature, consider whether e-mail and the Internet are appropriate methods of communication.
- Additional features such as cc: (carbon copy), bcc: (blind carbon copy), reply and forward can be useful as long as you understand how these features function, but they can be used incorrectly. Be careful with replying to all; do you really want everyone on the list to see your response?

Use good e-mail etiquette by following good business writing techniques:

- Write clearly and concisely, by planning what you want to communicate rather than writing “off the cuff.” Again, remember spelling and grammar checking. Proofread your e-mail before sending. Good writing is revision, revision, revision.
- If you are replying to someone, consider all their questions fully—provide what they need so they don’t have to contact you again to clarify a point.
- Be professional, but set a friendly warm tone.
- Consider using templates when replying to common questions.
- Respond in a timely fashion.
- Delete unnecessary information when replying to an e-mail, especially when it has been forwarded with other e-mail addresses included.

DOCUMENT YOUR POLICY FOR BUSINESS E-MAILS

When documenting your policy, be brief and keep it simple. Whether you have one employee or fifty, policies and procedures should support them, not complicate their job. Also, consider how you will update the policy and enforce it.

Before you start creating an e-mail policy, investigate existing company policies, such as guidelines on writing business letters, access to confidential information, personal use of the telephone systems and sexual or racial harassment. It is important that your e-mail policy is compatible with laws, regulations and your company’s existing policies. You will also need to decide whether your company is going to allow personal use of the e-mail system.

Minimize your liability by documenting your actions to prevent inappropriate use. You may choose to have employees sign the policy for your employment files to document that they are aware of the policy and consequences

Note: The e-mail policy should be drafted with the help of human resources, IT and top management in order to reflect all viewpoints in the organization. It is also advisable to have several employees look at the policy and provide their feedback. Make sure that your policy is not so restrictive that it will compromise morale and productivity.

IMPLEMENT RELATED E-MAIL PROCEDURES

It is important to communicate the e-mail format and procedures to your staff to ensure compliance and effectiveness. Some tips to consider:

- There are a variety of techniques to segregate incoming e-mails. Also, you can use different e-mail addresses to segregate different requests.

Inquiries about rentals may go to your “info@” address while tenant maintenance request can be sent to “maintenance@”, etc.

- Spam blockers or verification techniques can lower the volume of unsolicited e-mail.
- Document procedures for processing e-mails received. Determine who is responsible for responding to different groups of e-mails. Establish guidelines for expected response time and priority of your e-mail responses. Categorize the types of e-mails received. Who is responsible for which e-mails? When should they respond to ensure timeliness? How and what should a response include—should they respond by phone or e-mail, what information should be included, etc. Again, templates may be beneficial for some categories of e-mail messages to save time for your staff.
- Develop procedures to address legal considerations relating to e-mails received and sent. E-mail communications can and have been used to document violations of laws and company policies. What is appropriate or inappropriate for an e-mail? Your employees are agents of your business; they need to be aware of the constraints and consequences of their actions.


ENHANCE E-MAIL USAGE TO IMPROVE BUSINESS

Once you have policies and procedures in place for existing e-mail usages, investigate opportunities to improve and expand use of your e-mail system. Can e-mail services improve your business or expand your market? Are there other ways to use e-mails which can improve your business processes or cut costs such as postage? Two ideas might include:

- Automation: generate e-mails automatically such as monthly invoices, billings, late notices, tenant letters and maintenance notices.
- E-mail campaigns: generate newsletters or marketing campaigns using mailing lists for distribution.

RECAP

E-mail has become one of the most popular forms of communication. While it has its benefits, keep in mind that there are limitations. Be proactive by addressing your business use of e-mail communications before problems arise.

- Identify how your company uses e-mail and develop policies to reflect appropriate use.
- Support good communication skills and address any potential legal issues.
- Consider opportunities to use e-mail services to enhance communications and lower costs. 

Find additional information at <http://propertyboss.com/solutions/email.php> for the following topics:

- **Domain names**
- **E-mail Etiquette**
- **Sample Electronic Mail Policy**
- **Confidentiality Disclaimers**