Who Owns a Sent E-mail?

By Randy Dean, MBA – The E-mail Sanity Expert ™

Over the last ten years, I have led hundreds of sessions on effective e-mail management all across the United States, Canada, and Europe. After one of my recent client sessions in Atlanta, Georgia, I was pondering the question above. One of the attendees said, "It seems like once people hit 'Send', they often absolve themselves of all responsibility."

That really struck a nerve with me. Because when you think about it, many e-mail users do just that -- they hit "Send" and assume their work and responsibility is DONE. But there is a problem with this: how do you know that the e-mail you sent was both properly received, and was also properly understood? As a matter of fact, if you hit "Send", and think your work is over, I strongly believe you are basically asking to get burned, especially when sending e-mails of an urgent nature.

Here's why:

1. Some e-mails don't get there. This simple fact is a truth -- some e-mails don't get through. They fail. Failure rates are of course quite low inside of an organization, but once you send externally, a certain percentage of e-mails simply don't make it. (The other party might actually NOT be lying when they tell you they didn't get the message.)

2. Even if the e-mail gets through, the receiver might not be there. They are home with a sick kid. They are stuck in bad traffic. They are in a "run on" meeting. They are working on a deadline project and forget to check their e-mail. If you send them something requiring a quick (or even worse -- immediate!) reply, you are out of luck. They won't see it until it is too late.

3. They get it, but they don't understand it. Hey, maybe your e-mail composition skills aren't the best. You didn't make the problem, issue, or task terribly clear, or they lost the most important items in your dense text structure. Or, you sent it to 15 people, and no one realized they owned something in there. I see all of these happen all the time!

Because of these issues, I actually believe a "sent message" is actually still "owned" by the sender, until they can confirm that not only did the receiver get it, but the receiver also understands it and knows what they need to do with it. And, if something fails along the way, it likely isn't the receiver's fault (unless, of course, the receiver is just being careless and not paying appropriate and reasonably timely attention to what they received.)

If the sender is held accountable for most e-mail communication failure situations, I think that would change things dramatically. They would, by default:

1. Pick up the phone when sending something critical/urgent/hot. They wouldn't put all of their trust in e-mail servers, and/or that people are simply sitting at their desk waiting for the next e-mail to come in. They would OWN that message until they know it was properly received,
and, for truly urgent messages, they would confirm that receipt using a second communications tool like the telephone.

2. **They would write better e-mails and e-mail subject lines.** Put yourself in the recipient's shoes: can they easily and clearly understand both what the message is about, and what they need to do with it. If not, you as the sender might want to revise/edit/rewrite that message for clarity. *"I'm so sorry I wrote you a long letter. I didn't have time to write a short one."* - Sir Winston Churchill.

3. **They would ask for response if the recipient still is unclear.** All human brains work differently. You can't assume they understand you completely. Give them an option to follow up with you if they have any questions/confusion, and ask them to confirm both receipt and task deadlines/ownership in a short reply message. Then, you know it is now "theirs".

Before then, you as the Sender still own it. And you own any negative repercussions from a communications failure prior to this point. If everyone using e-mail considered this philosophy, I believe e-mail as a communications tool would dramatically improve quickly. The recipient isn't on the mark -- the sender is -- until that recipient clearly takes the baton. Get your people to understand this, and many less e-mail problems will occur.

*(This was a featured article in my Timely Tips monthly e-newsletter in May, 2015. To subscribe, send an e-mail to randy@randalldean.com and put "Subscribe" in the subject line.)*

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