

Drinking From The Fire Hose

by Kelly Addy

I believe I am the first attorney in Billings, Montana to buy a word processor, an IBM Displaywriter, back in my solo practice days of the early 1980s. It was the size of a work station, and a game changer.

Little did I know, though, how completely the game was going to change. We weren't just changing the playing board or pieces. We threw away the board and the pieces and the box.

The world around us has become digital. Anything we want is within reach, and there is so much. The trick is knowing what to leave behind and how to manage what we have.

The world has become digital indeed, and information is wealth. But we are still analogue creatures, absorbing knowledge one page at a time. We are all drinking from a fire hose.

So how do we get ourselves heard in the maelstrom of ideas that flash across our screens every day? How do we communicate so that people hear what we hope to convey?

Email communicates basic information. It is a place to put one idea at a time. The subject block needs to tell your reader what you want. The 'bottom line' needs to go to the top.

Some studies indicate that people who use electronic messages miss twenty percent or more of the information on the screen. If it is a long email you have received and you need to be sure you understand it all, print it out and read it.

We are still hard-wired for print media, but it is disappearing. It is too slow. You have to go get it. You have to remember where you filed it. It clutters your office. It is expensive. It is passé.

Your reader doesn't know you, doesn't appreciate the irony in your message, and is trying to decide whether this message is business or a whim, spam or malware. If your message doesn't appear on their message board, they may very well delete it.

If you want to have a social conversation that builds the relationship, pick up the phone and call them. Make sure they know who it is and what mutual interests and concerns you both have that you can solve together. Then work out the details with short, concise emails, documents attached.

Always include your contact information with the message. This is especially helpful when you are communicating on one of the IMLA listServs. Even when that is done, many people don't see it at the bottom of your message, which only reinforces the need to be brief and put the bottom line at the top.

Attach the documents you want to send as you begin composing the message. Just like your reader, you, too, will forget where you started by the time you get to the end, insert your signature block and hit send.

I hate to send that second email apologizing for not attaching the documents I promised to the first volley. I didn't keep a promise. I frustrated them. Now I am sending them one more email. Don't go there. Attach, then compose. If you need to look at the document as you draft the email, it's right there on your screen, as convenient for you as it will be for them.

Write in short paragraphs. White spaces unclutter your message and make it easier to absorb as your reader is scanning your text. One idea per paragraph. You are not writing War and Peace. You are writing a bumper sticker. That's the size of the mental window you need to hit.

Follow the tried-and-true standards set down in *The Elements of Style* in your emails. Abbreviations make the reader stop and interpret. This is email, speed-reading, scanning. People read it instantly or not at all.

Don't insert anything in an email you don't want to read on tomorrow's front page. It only feels like a confidential chat. It never goes away. It can be forwarded. It is a dispatch to everyone in the world. If you wouldn't put it on the bumper of your car, it doesn't belong in an email.

If it is an important communication, print it out and read it before you send it. Your spell-checker will not catch a misspelling of the word 'public' for instance. People will be reminding you of that for a long, long time.

Finally, since we are talking about listserv emails here, remember Bill Kearns' three maxims, which he first applied to the Water Cooler, but I think they have universal value: Civility, Courtesy, and Collegiality.

It is a tense, anxious world out there, and everyone is spring-loaded to be offended. These three simple, decent hallmarks of sharing information between busy people have to start somewhere.

Why shouldn't it start with us, the lawyers, the people call when they have been unable to discuss difficult subjects with people they don't know very well? Why can't we be the peacemakers?

We can. One carefully written message (that will be read as fast as it can be) at a time. ML

