Best practices - how to email uWaterloo students

Based on a recent survey of 300 Waterloo students and email communication best practices, we have created guidelines for emailing students to help you:

- Effectively convey your messages
- Increase the likelihood that students will open, read and retain your messages
- Meet student requests for concise, easy-to-read emails from their university

Formatting

Concise content
- Write concise emails with short blocks of text, using hyperlinks to direct students to more information on websites
- For longer emails or ones with several topics, consider adding a brief summary at the top of the email
- Use a consistent format for each of your emails
- **Note:** the longer an email, the less likely students will read beyond the first few lines
    - 44% want to see the entire email on their computer screen without having to scroll down
    - 70% of students read their email on their mobile device

Headings
- Break up topics and paragraphs with headings

Bullets
- Use bullets for lists and use numbered lists when outlining step-by-step instructions

Links
- Use hyperlinks to direct students to more detailed content online
- Avoid using "Click here + URL"; instead use: Please [register](#)

Fonts
- Use easy-to-read sans-serif fonts such as Arial, Calibri or Tahoma
- Use 11-12 pt font for body copy; 1-2 sizes larger for headings

Images/photos
- Some students told us relevant images add to the visual appeal of an email. However, best practices say to avoid this and we recommend you use images with caution.
    - Images aren't visible to those reading plain text email
    - To meet accessibility guidelines, all images must contain alt tags
    - On a mobile device, large photos impact download time and eat into data plans

Limit your use of
- CAPS - this reads like you are yelling
- Bold - use sparingly to draw attention to a specific item i.e. Your tuition is due **September 1, 2013**
- Colour - use sparingly to draw attention to a specific item **Note:** the colour red can often flag spam filters
- Attachments - do not send. Rather link to content on your website

Email content

- Consider who your audience is and tailor the content to them as much as possible
  - 42% of students want the content to be as relevant to them as possible i.e. their faculty, program or personal interests
- Consider: What do they really need to know, what value will this information have and is this the best way to share this message? Students want to learn about your messages:
  - On your website (53%), Facebook (49%), digital TV screens (38%), Twitter (35%)
  - **Note:** when your content is relevant to a majority of uWaterloo students, uwaterloolife can help spread your message through social media (Contact Kirsty Budd in SSO); uwaterloo can help you connect with the entire campus community (Contact Aaron Miller in CPA)
- Include a request for action in the message and keep it close to the top so it won't be missed. i.e. pay your tuition, register for event, provide feedback
- Students will not read email or only scan email if
  - They don't perceive content as relevant to them
  - Email has large blocks of text

Subject lines

- Write specific yet brief subject lines
  - Try: Faculty of X annual lecture invitation
  - Avoid: Faculty of X news
- Students say subject lines should
  - Use words that reflect what is actually in the email
  - Use "Important" (only when it actually is important to your audience not just the sender)
  - Mention fees, exams, enrollment etc. when this is the topic
  - Be tailored to their interests - graduate vs. undergraduate, year, faculty, program. etc.

From lines

- For mass emails, students generally prefer to have the email sent from the faculty/department/unit instead of a personal uwaterloo account
- Some students will not read email from senders who have previously sent too many irrelevant emails (students will blacklist the sender as a spammer)

Other things to consider

- Students want the opportunity to select what emails they receive. Where possible, allow students to unsubscribe from your email lists and remove them from your list as quickly as possible.
- Have students already received this from another source? Can you take the information and reframe it for your audience in another email you are sending to reduce duplication?
- Students want fewer emails from uWaterloo so where possible, consider sending a weekly/biweekly email from your area instead of multiple emails.