Email best practices - how to effectively email Waterloo students

Based on feedback from 1,100 Waterloo students and email communication best practices, we have created guidelines for emailing students to help you:

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

Email subject and sender lines – increase the likelihood that students will open your messages

Create clear and compelling subject lines
- Students are reading their email on mobile devices which typically display fewer characters of a subject line. When sending mass emails, write specific, yet brief subject lines (under 50 characters is ideal).
- Create subject lines that reflect the content that is in the email to build trust with your audience.
  - Try: You’re invited to Faculty of X annual lecture
  - Avoid: Faculty of X news, events and important updates
- Use “Important” only when it actually is important to your audience not just the sender.
- Use your subject line to give your audience a reason to explore your message further.
  - Try: Meet your academic advisor & learn about course selection
- If you send regular e-newsletters or reminders, avoid using the same subject line each time as this will decrease your open rates.

Think about who an email should be sent from
- In general, students are more likely to open an email when it comes from:
  - Their faculty or program
  - Someone they have a relationship with (professors, program coordinators and academic advisors were consistently identified by students as important sources of information)
- Some students will not read email from senders who have previously sent too many irrelevant emails (students will blacklist the sender as a spammer).

Email content and format – increase the likelihood that students will read and retain your messages

Create concise, actionable content with links to more information
- Because students are reading their email on mobile devices, they want short emails that make it easy to skim and scan, with links to more information on websites, if and when they need it.
- When adding links
  - Try: “Please register”
  - Avoid using “Click here to register + URL”
- Include a request for action in the message and keep it close to the top so it won’t be missed. For example: pay your tuition, register for an event, provide your feedback.
- If you’re sending a longer email or one with several topics, consider adding a brief summary or anchors at the top of the email.
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Use headings and bullets to break up content
• Break up topics and paragraphs with headings to improve scanability.
• Use bullets for lists and use numbered lists when outlining step-by-step instructions.
• If you send regular e-newsletters or emails, consider using a consistent content format so that your audience becomes comfortable with the format and knows where to find pertinent information.

Use appropriate fonts
• Use easy-to-read sans-serif fonts such as Arial, Calibri or Tahoma.
• Use 11-13 pt font for body copy; 1-2 sizes larger for headings. Some mobile devices will automatically scale font size to a minimum of 13 pt.
• Do not use CAPS - this reads like you are yelling.
• Do not overuse bold - use sparingly to draw attention to a specific item (Your tuition is due September 1, 2015).
• Do not use overuse colour - use sparingly to draw attention to a specific item Note: the colour red can often flag spam filters.

Think carefully about including visuals
• Relevant images can add to the visual appeal of an email. However, best practices say to use caution.
  o Images won’t be visible to those reading plain text email – make sure important information is not only included in emails as a visual.
  o To meet accessibility guidelines, all images must contain alt tags – make sure each visual has supporting text content that can be read by a screen reader.
  o On a mobile device, large photo files can impact download time and eat into data plans – make sure visuals are compressed files.

Other items to consider
• When forwarding a message to students, think about whether or not they would have already received this message from another source. Can you take the information and reframe or target it for your audience? Could you add it to another email you are already sending to reduce email overload?
• Students would like fewer emails from their university, so where possible, consider sending a weekly/biweekly email from your area instead of multiple emails over the course of a week.
• When possible, do not send attachments. Instead, host content on your website and link to it there. This ensures you have the ability to be responsive and quickly update content if it becomes outdated.