



Hold the Emoji and Other Tips for Successful Email Negotiations

Tactics for increasing B2B sales.✉

When your own inbox is overflowing with unread messages, it may not seem like the best tactic but with the right approach, email can be a powerful negotiation tool, not least in the B2B realm. According to 2019 **research** by IACCM, a global contract management association, about 75 percent of contract negotiations are completely virtual.

Nowadays, many B2B sales negotiations involve an open bid process with a standardised communication where relationship bonds are less important. In that context, emails offer a number of advantages. For instance, they can be instantly accessed, often by many parties in an organisation, thus creating transparency. Emails also allow a rich diversity of materials to be used as attachments.

Negotiations via email can be particularly suitable when gender, age or racial biases – or linguistic issues such as a strong accent – could mar the process. It can also help when there is a power distance between parties or when some voices risk being unheard.

However, email communication requires a certain technique in order to maximise the chances of closing the deal. As email is so widely used, every salesperson is competing for buyers' attention. According to a **study** involving a top B2B manufacturer of customised equipment for heavy industry, a successful combination of influence

tactics can increase buyers' interest and the likelihood of a contract.

In that study, researchers examined more than two years of email communication between B2B buyers and salespeople. Their analysis of the textual cues in these emails revealed two pairs of tactics that salespeople can use to influence buyers:

- Information sharing and recommendation
- Promise and assertiveness

Information sharing involves the transfer of knowledge and data, often with drawings, white papers and industry reports, aimed at overcoming buyers' objections. In the *recommendation* tactic, the seller suggests (using verbs such as “recommend”, “offer”, “advise”) a certain course of action, usually scrutinised by the buyer for any self-serving claims. The most effective recommendations present the status quo as a suboptimal solution which can be improved with the seller's proposed course of action.

For example, an investment advisor can point out to her client that her current portfolio allocation has a poor risk/reward ratio and recommend improving the allocation according to her expertise. Concurrent use of information sharing and recommendation tactics acts in complementary ways to persuade buyers to evaluate for themselves

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the cost benefits of the seller's proposal. It triggers an internal analysis, one in which the buyer feels in control.

Promise and *assertiveness* is another set of complementary influencing tactics that increase buyers' attention and the likelihood of a deal closure. Promise is manifested through the seller's commitment to a future action benefitting the buyer. For example, an investment advisor would commit to optimise her client's portfolio on a half-yearly basis. Assertiveness is demonstrated by the seller using a clear call to action, with pronouns such as "I", "we" or "you" as well as "need", "would" or "should" verbs. This combination of tactics helps the buyer shift the risk of decision making to the seller. The goal is to trigger compliance, as opposed to an internal analysis. It is particularly effective when uncertainty is high, time is short and the cognitive resources of the buyer are stretched.

The researchers in this study concluded that salespeople who successfully increased a buyer's attention by a factor of one standard deviation multiplied the likelihood of a contract award by seven. In the case of a company operating in a US\$1.6 billion market, it could mean an additional US\$37 million in revenues. The concurrent use of information sharing and recommendation techniques during email negotiations boosted buyers' attention by 15 percent. The combination of promise and assertiveness tactics led to a similar, 14 percent increase. In contrast, the unfortunate combination of competing tactics such as *recommendation* and *promise* (which respectively aim at triggering internal analysis and compliance) degraded buyer's attention by 30 percent and greatly reduced the likelihood of a deal.

Overcoming the challenges of email negotiations

While Roderick Swaab and colleagues **showed** that the outcome of a negotiation is determined by its parties' orientation towards cooperation or competition, rather than by the communication channels they use, email negotiations can raise a number of hurdles. A literature **review** by Noam Ebner has highlighted a number of potential pitfalls – and attending solutions – that email negotiators need to be aware of.

As email doesn't naturally include relationship building, parties may exchange less about their respective needs and interests, which can lead to fewer joint gains. Oftentimes, email negotiators **trust** their counterparty less than face-to-face negotiators. They give each other less benefit of doubt, attributing negative intentions in the process. The lack of contextual cues, such as the tone of voice or body language, can rapidly increase the risk of misinterpretation.

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To compensate for this, setting the right tone from the start can help. Ebner suggests to build rapport and reduce the perception of distance through using shared linguistic, geographical or cultural references. For instance, you could include information or even pictures about the city you are based in. You may ask questions of a social nature to show empathy. The idea is to alleviate the feeling that the negotiating parties are just inboxes. However, be aware that using humour and emoticons or emojis can be a double-edged sword. In the professional world, it is best to keep this form of communication to people with whom you have already established considerable understanding and trust.

There are times when the asynchronous nature of emails can work to your advantage. For instance, if the negotiations risk turning into an argument, slow down the pace to avoid being "emotionally hijacked". Besides, one of the benefits of email negotiations is the time and space it can give both parties to think and reflect. Use this to come up with more creative solutions instead.

Checklist

1. Try to find commonalities
2. Hold the emoji
3. Don't reply when feeling emotional
4. Be upfront if you need time to reply
5. Share as much as you can, but stay as succinct as possible
6. Be thorough when addressing issues; piecemeal isn't the way
7. Probe, don't shoot, if parts of your email are unanswered

If you find yourself unable to reply immediately – or need time to craft a more effective reply – you should ideally give your counterparty a sense of the feasible timeline. If you require an urgent response, following up with a phone call or another communication channel can highlight the importance you place on the negotiation.

Generally, communicating more rather than less has been shown to increase joint gains in email negotiations. While it may be tempting to write long messages, you must also take care to avoid overloading your counterpart. Consider using a particularly well-designed chart, graph or multimedia presentation to share salient information.

Bundling various issues in a single email to create connection and prioritisation might also result in more joint gains as opposed to when issues are discussed separately. However, should your counterparty pick up on some issues but not others, it is worth probing for a more thorough response. Apparent cherry-picking might be due to multitasking, not malice.

Last but not least, emails have been associated with diminished privacy. Always keep in mind the ease with which emails can be accessed by external parties. Be particularly mindful when replying to all, or when using the cc and bcc fields. To be on the safe side, assume your messages will be shared far and wide.

Email as an anti-discrimination tool

With its lack of contextual cues, email may be best suited to negotiations involving a standardised process, which is increasingly the case in the B2B world. An email channel is also beneficial for negotiators with a relatively weak voice since it can fudge the power distance among negotiators. As such, parties with a relatively low status have a better chance of getting their point across than in face-to-face negotiations. Furthermore, email is ideal when there is potential for racial, gender or age discrimination. The lean nature of this medium means that it is not without its healthy dose of challenges. Being aware of these challenges and using appropriate mitigating techniques can improve your negotiation outcomes and help you get what you want.

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