First e-Impressions

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When you receive an e-mail message from a stranger, do you care whether it has spelling mistakes and grammar mistakes? What about offensive language and off-color humor? Does the context matter? For example, do you apply the same standards to e-mail referring to business matters and to informal communications about, say, a hobby or interest?

Researchers at the University of Chicago have been investigating the effects of e-mail on perceptions of character. According to a summary by Cathy Tran in _Science Now_ <http://sciencenow.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/2005/719/1> (by subscription only), psychologist Nicholas Epley and colleagues examined conversations carried out exchanges on conversational topics by phone between randomly selected people using six assigned questions. They then transcribed the answers and used them for the e-mail version of the Q&A sessions.

Their results were interesting. The questioners had been given false biographical sketches of the people they were communicating with indicating substandard intelligence or normal intelligence as well as different pictures showing neat people or slobs. Questionnaires who used the phone to listen to the prescribed responses had favorable impressions of their interlocutor’s intelligence regardless of the bios and pictures. In contrast, “Via e-mail, however, students held onto their first impressions, continuing to assume their partners had substandard intelligence, for example, if that's what the biographical sketch indicated.”

If this research is confirmed, I think the lesson for us is that when using e-mail, first impressions really do count. Professionals should carefully review e-mail messages for acceptable writing, including word-choice, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.

Looking like an idiot is easy; correcting that impression via e-mail may not be so easy.

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