

Everyone hates email. And yet we can't stop checking it. Recent studies show that office workers dip into their inboxes on average a whopping 74 times a day and spend roughly 28 percent of their total workday on the task of reading and responding to email.

Goleman found that if the sender felt positive about an email, then the receiver usually just felt neutral. And if the sender felt neutral about the message, then the receiver typically felt negative about it. IN other words, email really is like kryptonite when it comes to expressing positive emotions: it's as if every message you send gets automatically downgraded a few positivity notches by the time someone else receives it.

Sociologist Phillip Kunz proved the unexpected power of the rule of reciprocity with an unusual, DIY experiment back in the 1970s. He made up hundreds of holiday greetings, with each including either a handwritten note of a card and a picture of Kunz and his family. Then, around Christmastime he mailed the holiday cards to 600 perfect strangers.

Amazingly, a wave of replies started coming in soon afterward. Some people responded with lengthy three- to four-page letters updating him on their lives, while other sent pictures and shared news of their families. Kunz ended up receiving over 200 responses in total. Even more incredibly, he continued to receive holiday cards from many of those "strangers" for another 15 years.

Would you respond to a holiday card from a stranger? The mere notion probably sounds laughable in these days of dwindling snail mail. But what about replying to an email from a stranger? I bet you've already done it many time and will no doubt do so again in the near future.

What if you pictured the messages in your inbox like a stack of real, physical mail? IF you got 200+ letters a day, you would never think it was realistic to respond to all of them. Why should email be any different? Your time is limited, and you can only respond to so much. Visualizing your email as a physical object gives you a more realistic understanding of how possible—or impossible—reciprocity really is. This encourages you to make hard choices about which messages deserve a hand-crafted response, which can tolerate a templated reply, and which do not warrant a response at all. Politely responding to every single email you receive is all well and good, but not if it makes you a stranger to your own goals.

In a now-classic MetaFilter post, Andrea Donderi theorizes that everyone is raised as either an asker or a guesser. In an ask culture you are taught that asking for whatever you need is fine, with the understanding that the person you're asking can always decline. In a guess culture you are taught that you should only ask for something if you think you are very likely to get a yes. IN other words, you are trained to be attentive to subtle details and signs that will help you asses the likelihood that someone will be receptive to your proposal.

The problem emerges when askers confront guessers. Askers are inclined to just "put it out there" no matter what and leave the decision up to you: *Can I crash in your studio apartment for a week? Will you code my website for free? Could you donate money to my new business venture?* You get the idea.

Askers don't mind if you say no because they were just testing the waters. But guessers have trouble believing that. They naturally assume that askers share their mindset, so they don't think someone would ask for something if they didn't expect a yes. Thus, when askers collide with guessers, their requests can often come off as brazen or presumptuous.

What if you stepped into the asker's shoes every time you got an email that felt like an imposition? Rather than assuming the sender expects you to say yes— and resenting the unwanted obligation—assume he thinks it's a longshot. Reframing the situation like this makes it easier to put the ask in perspective and consider the opportunity with a relaxed attitude. Once you level the playing field between the possibility of saying yes and the possibility of saying no, it becomes easier to gracefully decline inquiries that don't align with your priorities. Remember, email martyrdom doesn't increase your productivity; it only increases your blood pressure. Acknowledge that you always have a choice what you take on— and make it.

Part 2: Strategy

Your relationship to the person emailing you should govern its importance– Or lack thereof.

Avoid leaving your email open in the background. Research has shown that just having your email program open in the background of your computer screen as you focus on another task, even if the window is minimized, can decrease performance.

Don't let the default settings dictate your workflow. The easiest way to fail at email is to accept your inbox "As is".

Decide if email is the appropriate medium for your response.

Close conversations at the earliest opportunity. The best way to get less email is to send less email.

Part 3: Style

Emphasize the benefits of the task. It's helpful to provide some greater context for the request.... You could frame the benefit in terms of gratitude. "if you could just make this one tweak, it would really help me out, and then we'll be done."

Part 4: Superpowers

Negotiating a fee for yourself.

Talented individuals under sell their skills and services every day because they can't stomach a frank discussion about money. Although there's no denying that negotiation can be uncomfortable, the payoff for tolerating it can be huge. A mere 15 to 30 minutes of discomfort now will typically increase your wages for years into the future. If you intend to make your livelihood by getting paid to do meaningful creative work, you literally cannot afford to ignore the importance of becoming your own best financial advocate.

Creating an auto responder to handle email overload

Hi there – this is an auto response because I now receive more email and one human can reasonably respond to.