

Choose your e-mail signoff

G COVER

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Best Regards. Cheers. Hungrily yours. Pax.
Come again?

As the lingo of Twitter, Facebook, and texting creeps more and more into daily conversation, it's also changing the way people are signing off in their e-mails. Eccentric closings like Pax, which means "peace" in Latin, have jumped from the scriptures to cyber space as more people seek to distinguish themselves amid an inbox overload. And acronyms like "lol" and "gtg," once limited to texting only, are creeping into e-mails.

Kevin Walsh, a Comcast SportsNet New England anchor who lives in Wellesley, updated his sign-off on the advice of a priest who told him: "You've got to stop using cheers. It's much too British for an Irish boy like you," Walsh recalled.

Now committed to "Pax" on Facebook and e-mail, the 41-year-old Walsh has no plans to change his distinctive tag. "I want to honor my roots and be different from everyone else," he said.

Standing out in the e-mail onslaught is a challenge. By 2013 approximately 507 billion e-mail messages will be sent each day, according to the Radicati Group Inc., a California-based tech research firm. Even now an e-mail is sent every 0.00000035 seconds. In this welter everyone from bloggers to grandmothers are looking for ways to breathe life into their e-missives.

And just as a handwritten signature gives a personal touch to a typewritten letter, the e-mail sign-off is the only opportunity to add some warmth to a digital note.

"In the world we are living in now, these communications are becoming more friendly and loose," said Corissa St. Laurent of e-mail marketing company Constant Contact. St. Laurent, who heads corporate development for New England, runs workshops to help employees appear approachable in e-mail and keep things casual enough so "people can read your tone."

That means DON'T USE ALL CAPS TO SIGNIFY ANGER OR URGENCY. And, yes, think about dropping in an emoticon, even though it makes some people wince. Marianne Gries of Lowell, who is very brief in her e-mail communication, will tuck in a smiley face so "people won't think I'm mad or mean." Working in the nonprofit sector where language is full of jargon, she strives for clarity when using e-mails, texts, and tweets. Even in 140 characters she refuses to abbreviate.

"It's kind of obnoxious when you are not communicating as clearly as possible," she said. "A lot of abbreviations are not standard across the board.

"That makes it difficult," said Gries, 37, who works for the Lowell Alliance for Families and Neighborhoods.

She admitted she has a crotchety approach, but said, "if you are going to write something you should write it as well as possible. Respect the form of communication."

No matter how Hemingway-esque our e-mails are, or are not, the only goal is, of course, to make sure they are read before they are deleted. That's why experts say that any touch of individuality might mean the difference between getting a response or hearing nothing back at all.

"Like the dismount from the balance beam in the Olympics, if you don't think about the way you are ending your e-mail you are going to lose points from the judges," said Jodi R. R. Smith, a Marblehead etiquette consultant who schools businesses on corporate e-mail dos and don'ts. "Even if you are polite in

your entire e-mail, if you have something perceived in your auto-signature that's off the mark," it can dash a deal, said Smith.

That means no biblical quotes or localisms if you are sending out an e-mail to a wide audience, she said. And while it's tempting to get cheeky if you don't have business on the line, experts say it's important to remember that e-mails can live forever. That's why more people working for themselves should use their e-mails as an opportunity to strengthen their brand.

"Hungrily yours" is how Rachel Leah Blumenthal signs her e-mail newsletter at Boston Food Bloggers, a networking site she runs for local food scribes. The blast goes out to 200 wired bloggers, so she needed something grabby. "It came to me quickly. I must have been hungry," said Blumenthal, who has been signing off this way to her food friends for months. "I loved it, but was unsure at first. So far no one's commented on it; I hope they get down that far," she said.

As marketing and content editor for Cambridge video company Pixability, she is more "generic and polite" in her work e-mails.

Sifting through scores of messages daily, abbreviations such as EOM in the subject line initially gave her pause. This acronym for "end of message" is a "mix between instant messaging and e-mailing" and doesn't bother her now that she knows what it means.

With a population of trigger-happy texters toggling between two worlds, formalities die and abbreviations crop up.

But the mashup is not fine with everyone. "When someone uses text language when sending e-mail from an actual computer it makes my head spin," said Gries, who has noticed work peers dashing off e-mails that say: "Cu at the mtg l8r." To her, that's "very unprofessional."

Another e-mail nuisance that has popped up with greater frequency is the cryptic "J" at the end of a sentence. A glitch in certain software programs like Microsoft's Outlook changes the friendly :) to a cold J. "The weird J drove me crazy to the point where I had to look up what the heck it meant," said Gries. "Now I judge Outlook instead of the person sending the message."

Professors studying e-mail usage say that text lingo staking its ground in e-mail is here to stay. "We are not as sensitive to the format," said Brian Uzzi, a leadership professor at Northwestern University, who spent six months examining corporate e-mail behavior for a study released in November. "As the volume of e-mail has gone up people are finding ways to economize their time," he said.

The first things to go are capital letters, punctuation, and long-form spelling.

"There was a point, not long ago, when people used letters for a more formal exchange of ideas," said Uzzi. Now that e-mail has replaced letters in most instances, formality is starting to slide because "formal salutations don't sound right for these casual conversations," he said. "Some of these changes are the analogue for slang and spoken language."

The ones he sees most on campus, LOL and K, are "creeping into spoken language. Things like GTG (got to go) and LUL (love you lots), people will bring those in on e-mails too," said Uzzi. BTW, next time you dash off an e-mail, consider giving Pax a chance.

"It's not just goodbye, there is a little extra love in it," said Walsh, who is not trying to end the conversation, he says, but rather to "send good will your way."