

Title:

10 Tips for Using Instant Messaging for Business

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Summary:

<p>Here's the scene: A couple dozen professionals at a big advertising agency quietly type away at computer screens near each other, in an open room devoid of office walls and partitions. </p>

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Article Body:

<p>Here's the scene: A couple dozen professionals at a big advertising agency quietly type away at computer screens near each other, in an open room devoid of office walls and partitions. </p>

<p>An occasional laugh punctuates the silence. But no one is talking. They are communicating with one another almost exclusively through instant messaging (IM). </p>

<p>"When I'm visiting this firm, I can't help but notice this [lack of people talking]. Seems odd to an outsider, but this is now pretty much their corporate culture," says Helen Chan, analyst for The Yankee Group, a US-based technology research group, who has friends at the agency. </p>

<p>A technology designed initially for one-on-one personal chats has reached the workplace. Many business people are choosing text-based Instant Messaging over phone calls and email. They prefer its immediacy and efficiency in getting real-time information from partners, suppliers and colleagues working remotely. </p>

<p>Instant messaging is essentially the text version of a phone call. At businesses large and small, more and more people are using it to communicate. For many, it serves as a backstop for e-mail problems and other emergencies – witness the spikes in usage after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. </p>

<p>The Wall Street Journal notes that more than 100 million people are now sending instant messages. In a report, "IM: The Sleeping Giant," technology consultant Gartner Group predicts that by 2005, instant messaging will surpass email as the primary online communications tool. </p>

<p>That said, IM will benefit businesses that work in teams or on projects more than it will many retailers, independent professionals and others. That's because IM enhances collaboration, but does not lend itself to opening new relationships. However, aside from the opportunities for time and cost savings,

there are risks and downsides to its use. </p>

<p>Whether you're a business owner or an avid IM user, or both, here are 10 instant messaging do's and don'ts. </p>

<p>1. Do adopt a user policy for instant messaging. If you're an owner, your employees need to know whether you view instant messaging as an appropriate vehicle to communicate with, say, customers or business partners. Any policy should contain at least general guidelines for its use. You may not think this is important – unless you know the story about the hedge fund manager who caused a major commotion by allegedly using IM to spread inaccurate rumours about a publicly traded software company. (Word got out, the software company's stock plunged, and the hedge fund manager and his company got into some serious trouble.) </p>

<p>2. Don't use instant messaging to communicate confidential or sensitive information. Take a lesson from the above example. If your company is in the business of providing professional advice regarding stocks, finances, medicine or law, chances are it's not smart to do so through instant messaging. IM is better suited to quick information about project status, meeting times, or a person's whereabouts. </p>

<p>3. Do organise your contact lists to separate business contacts from family and friends. Make sure your employees do the same. Eliminate even the remote possibility that a social contact could be included in a business chat with a partner or customer – or vice versa. MSN Messenger[link] lets you organise your contacts carefully. </p>

<p>4. Don't allow excessive personal messaging at work. Yes, you make personal phone calls at work, send personal emails, and allow your employees to do the same. But you encourage them to keep it to a minimum and (hopefully) do the same yourself. For instant messaging go even further. Urge that personal chats be done during breaks or the lunch hour – or that the chats generate new customers or revenue to the business. </p>

<p>5. Do be aware that instant messages can be saved. You may think IM is great because you can let your guard down, make bold statements, chastise a boss, employee or co-worker, and have it all wiped away from the record when you are done. What you aren't realising is that one of the parties to your conversation can copy and paste the entire chat onto a notepad or Word document. Some IM services allow you to archive entire messages. Be careful what you say, just like you would in an email. </p>

<p>6. Don't compromise your company's liability, or your own reputation. The courts may still be figuring out where instant messages stand in terms of libel, defamation and other legal considerations. It's likely that any statements you make about other people, your company or other companies probably aren't going to land you in court. But they could damage your reputation or credibility. Be careful what you say. </p>

<p>7. Do be aware of virus infections and related security

risks. Most IM services allow you to transfer files with your messages. Alexis D. Gutzman, an author and eBusiness consultant, says her recent research for a book found that IM file attachments carrying viruses penetrate firewalls more easily than email attachments. "Instant messages [carrying viruses] will run and dip into a firewall until they find an opening," she says. You'd be wise to learn more about the quality of your own firewall protection, to decide whether or not to restrict transferring files through IM. </p>

<p>8. Don't share personal data or information through IM. Even if you have the utmost trust in the person or people you are messaging, including personal information you'd rather keep confidential (like a phone number) is not a good idea. That's because the text of your chat is relayed through a server en route to your contact. "If anyone is on the connection and can see that traffic, they can see the personal information," says Chris Mitchell, lead program manager with MSN Messenger. Not likely, perhaps. But it's better to send such info through an encrypted email, or not at all. </p>

<p>9. Do keep your instant messages simple and to the point, and know when to say goodbye. How you should use IM is hard to stipulate. Kneko Burney, director of eBusiness research at Cahners In-Stat Group, prefers it simply for seeing if a colleague is at his or her desk, available for an in-person or telephone call. "It's like peeking into someone's office." Gutzman, on the other hand, sees IM as a way to do quick research and get fast information from consultants and even lawyers. She recently used IM in researching a book, saving entire messages in her personal archives. Both agree, however, that you must limit your inquiry, get to the point right away, and avoid unnecessary blather. "With instant messaging, you don't need a lot of pleasantries," Gutzman says. "I pretty much can say, 'How's it going?' and then get on with my question." </p>

<p>10. Don't confuse your contacts with a misleading user name or status. IM user names, like email user names, should be consistent throughout your company. And users should do the courtesy of updating their status throughout the day, so contacts know whether they are available for messages. </p>