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## Upfront

**Missed Signal: Why e-mail messages are so often misunderstood.**  
**By Alessandra Bianchi**

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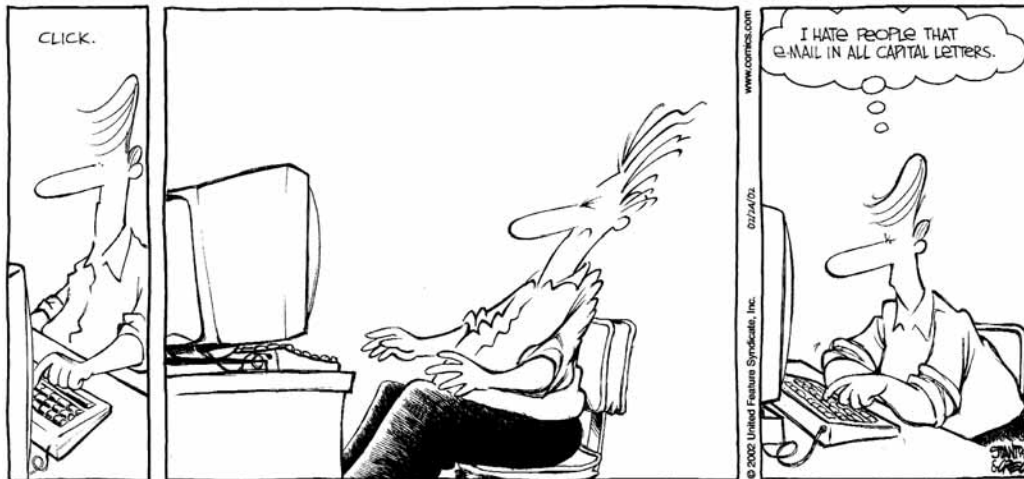


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Stanford Social Innovation Review  
518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305-5015  
Ph: 650-725-5399. Fax: 650-723-0516  
Email: [info@ssireview.com](mailto:info@ssireview.com), [www.ssireview.com](http://www.ssireview.com)

## THE BUCKETS

BY SCOTT STANTIS & GREG CRAVENS



## Missed Signals

*Why e-mail messages are so often misunderstood*

Like most people in the 21st century, Bob Kenny uses e-mail to communicate with his co-workers. Kenny, a child psychologist by training, is executive director of the More Than Money Institute, a Concord, Mass.-based educational and advocacy group that helps people use their money to act on their values. Lately, the psychologist in Kenny has become intrigued by how his staffers misperceive his e-mail messages.

For example, when he e-mails staffers that he would “really like” them to be at an event, “they think this is a commandment from on high,” Kenny says. He adds: “It’s so easy for them to project onto my e-mail whatever message they want, including, ‘Oh my god, he’s mad at me!’ I have to be really clear and careful with my choice of words, because with e-mail, affect and nuances are completely missed. For people [like psychologists] who are trained to be in a room with someone, it can be pretty challenging.”

Fittingly, psychological research bears out Kenny’s observations. In a December 2005 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* article, researchers Justin Kruger, Nicholas Epley, Jason Parker, and Zhi-Wen Ng show that people believe they communicate via e-mail more effectively than they actually do. In a series of studies, the researchers asked pairs of students to e-mail each other messages with different emotional content, such as sarcasm, seriousness,

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anger, or sadness. The person who crafted the message – the sender – then guessed how well the receiver understood each message’s emotional meaning, and the receiver reported what he or she actually perceived it to be.

The researchers found that senders routinely overestimated how well receivers understood the messages’ emotional intent. At the root of their findings, the authors suggest, is a kind of egocentrism: “Because people know when they are trying to be sarcastic, for instance, they egocentrically assume that their audience will know

as well,” they write.

Unsettling as the research findings may be for an increasingly wired general public, they have particular resonance for the nonprofit community. As Epley, a psychologist at the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, explains: “Nonprofit organizations and socially responsible companies are frequently in the business of making moral or emotional appeals to consumers or constituents. Such appeals rely on their emotional impact for their effectiveness in eliciting contributions and altering behavior. E-mail is a tempting avenue for such appeals because it is relatively cheap, wide-ranging, and easy to do, but as a medium may not be nearly as effective as one would think.”

No need to abandon one’s e-mail account, though. Instead, Epley suggests that organizations be more savvy about what can be communicated effectively over e-mail – mainly content – and what cannot – mainly emotions and tones. —*Alessandra Bianchi*