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By Alex Berger,
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Is E-Mail Dead?

A Millennial's view on today's trusty tool

STOP! BEFORE YOU click the send button and fire off that next e-mail, ask yourself, "Who is my audience and what is their age demographic?" As we prepare to enter a new decade, it's time to think about how the use of e-mail has changed since 1995. Those who are 26 years and younger—"Millennials"—have a very different attitude about it than Generation X or even Y.

In the mid to late '90s, e-mail was the leading edge. It offered unparalleled utility, was time effective and cost sensitive. It quickly became a requirement in most places of business and a part of our daily routine. Yet, despite its apparent necessity, the next few years will see e-mail moved to the endangered species list.

Change of Address

Non-Millennials embraced the Internet during a period when Internet Service Providers (ISP) and work-associated e-mails were king. If you're over 26, you've probably had one e-mail address associated with your home ISP and a second professional e-mail for work. Most non-Millennials change their e-mail only when they move or change employers, so they have had maybe two addresses in the last 10 to 15 years.

Millennials, on the other hand, have been forced to adapt. During the peak of the tech boom, America's youth were flooding online. Hungry for privacy and their own piece of online real estate, they signed up for free e-mail providers like Hotmail, Yahoo and eventually Google. They had free time, a burning curiosity, and a native understanding of the web which drove them to explore ... sometimes recklessly.

What many discovered was an inbox inundated with spam. While older generations used e-mail for conversations, Millennials had instant messaging. The end result was a transient relationship with e-mail. Too much spam? Just register a new address. Interests changed? Register a new address. Pokemonmaster87@hotmail.com too childish? Time for another. An environment quickly evolved where keeping your address book up to date was impossible.

Enter Social Media

Many people were shocked by how sites like Facebook became so successful among young people. The answer is simple. Social media sites provided a "one-stop shop" for most of the resources Millennials desperately needed. They wanted a simple service that essentially replaced e-mail with a database-driven address book that users automatically updated—and one that provided real-time chat, e-mail-like functionality and the ability to share rich media.

Facebook and co. rocked the boat but didn't end e-mail's dominance. After all, e-mail still offers value not readily duplicated by social networks. It remains our go-to resource for sharing documents and files, the preferred medium for professional communication (especially due to its archival value) and a necessity for trans-generational communication.

It's time to prepare for a new decade, one that's no longer shackled to e-mail. File sizes are skyrocketing and have quickly swamped e-mail's capability. This has spawned spinoff resources, such as Drop.io, which allow quick and easy file sharing. Social media is no longer the sole domain of Millennials and the occasional early adopter. It's reached a critical mass where Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn are commonplace. They've become the new status quo, paving the way for the mass adoption of Google Wave and similar products delivering a more engaging, real-time, collaborative and user-friendly experience. It all points to a future that is sure to retire e-mail to the domain of rotary telephones, typewriters and fax machines.

So, before you hit send, ask yourself, is e-mail really the right medium for your message? ■

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