

Responding to e-mail

A well-phrased automatic response can help keep state officials in touch with their constituents.

The computer age has touched every facet of society, and politics is no exception. More than half of Americans have computers in their homes, and many use e-mail to contact state officials.

It is not surprising that people are choosing e-mail as their preferred mode of communication because it's quick, simple and economical. But the result of this trend is that more and more state officials are saying they need help in organizing, prioritizing and answering the huge amount of e-mail they receive every day.

One tool that could help state officials is the automatic response. The auto response can confirm that a sender's e-mail has been received and tell the sender what to expect next.

For an auto response to be effective, it must be designed well. First, the auto response must target the right audience. Many people who e-mail a state official are not from his or her district, and may

not even be from the same state. Thus, the auto response should not begin with a greeting such as "Dear Third District Constituent," or end with a sentence like "Thank you for your correspondence. I greatly appreciate hearing the concerns of the citizens of Florida."

A more generic greeting is best for auto response. One way to begin might be a simple greeting with no qualifiers, such as "Thank you for your recent e-mail."

Second, make it clear that you are simply confirming you have received their e-mail, not providing a personalized response to it.

Third, let the sender know whether and under what circumstances you plan to provide a personalized response. For example, if you send a personal response only to people who include a postal mailing address, you might add a paragraph that says, "All responses will be made via the U.S. Postal Service. If you did not include a mailing address with

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your message, please resend your message with a postal address."

Some officials might have a policy of not responding to people from outside the district, but e-mail comes from people all over the country for many different reasons. You might consider telling senders that while those in your district will have priority, you will consider responding to all e-mail.

Fourth, it can be very useful to add a link to your official Web site or home page in your automatic response.

If you plan to change your e-mail address, mention this in the auto response. If your address recently has changed, leave a message on the old server to let those who send messages there know about the new address. This is especially helpful to managers at any e-mail service you subscribe to, such as CSG's "In the News." Each week, CSG is unable to deliver "In the News" to many state officials because their addresses have changed.

Finally, emergencies do arise, and sometimes an official must be contacted quickly. As fast as e-mail is, it may not be the quickest way to reach a live human being. Thus, it is beneficial to add a phone number and/or fax number at the end of the auto response. Providing alternate contact information is always useful.

Following these suggestions, and adding any other pertinent information, will make the auto response a productive and efficient tool for both state officials and those they serve. 

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A sample auto response

Thank you for contacting me via e-mail. This is an automatic response to let you know that your message was received.

Your comments and concerns are important to me, but due to time constraints, I am unable to respond to each message personally. All responses will be made via the U.S. Postal Service. If you did not include a postal address with your original message and wish to receive a response, please resend your message with a postal address. Priority will go to residents in my district.

If your message was of a highly important matter, you may contact my office at (xxx) xxx-xxxx, or you may fax my office at (xxx) xxx-xxxx. For more information about my service in the state capitol and upcoming events in our state government, please visit my Web site at www.xxxxxxxx.org.

Thank you for taking the time to write.

Sincerely,

Your state representative