

By JARED SANDBERG

'A Friend Is Someone Who Senses How To Sign Off an Email'

HEATHER NEWCOMB, a bank vice president, has received a number of emails in which there's an inspirational quote at the end of it from author Leo Buscaglia saying: "Too often we underestimate the power of a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around."

It flummoxes her—not the sentiment but the need for someone to share it with her. "I don't often underestimate that," she says in protest. "It's presumptuous for the writer to think people are underestimating it."

She just senses that these "soap-box exclamations" affixed to the bottom of emails for years now, are also "a little preachy." And she can't figure out why people often include adages, axioms and morals in their so-called email signatures. "Is it to communicate an opinion or add a Hallmark card personal sentiment?" she wonders.

Yes. Practiced recollectors and Bartlett's groupies have been around forever, speaking through the mouths of other great men and women when the moment warrants it. But email has given new lift to the tendency. In the flavorless workplace vernacular, where people seem to talk about business in a way that they only suspect it should sound, adages can entertain, intrigue, inspire or personalize the sender more than the mundane text of many emails.

BUT SOMETIMES what is sent differs significantly from what is received, which can more or less be characterized as personal badvertising, or opinions never sought.

Management consultant Bill Casey thinks email signatures can be either sappy, "like a feathery pompom on the end of your pen" or at best clever. But "like a vase of fresh flowers, they start to smell bad in a few days," he says.

Mr. Casey isn't sure everyone needs to know someone's philosophy. "It's like people who have personal Web sites," he says. "Why would I care if some scientist likes to go rock climbing? This is a sorry surrogate for actually conveying who you are."

Not so, say the quoters. Aaron Dragushan, president of an online software company, likes them so much he has compiled 4,467 quotations on his Web site, Coolsig.com, that range from the cloying ("A friend is someone who knows the song in your heart and can sing it back to you when you have forgotten the words") to Jack Handy specials ("If I ever get real rich, I hope I'm real mean to poor people, like I am now.")

Mr. Dragushan says the quotes make business personal and people human. It's like wearing a cool T-shirt to a business meeting without ever referring to it, he says.

That's not exactly how Susan Credle, creative director at an advertising agency, sees it. She can't identify any upside to some personality-defining quote at the end of an email. "If I know someone, then I don't need a quote to tell me about that person. And if I don't know the person, I'm not sure a quote is a great way to define him or herself," she says.

But quoters counter, as they always can: "The beautiful thing about quotes is you can find a quote that supports anything you say," says Jonathan Vehar, a partner in an organizational development firm, who has collected 50 pages of material. Never mind that this form of self-expression is really someone-else expression. It gives him the third-party validation that he needs. "If Gandhi agrees with me, that makes me right," he says.

Lately, he used a quote from Bill Gates, not exactly Churchillian, that's drawn a positive response. "Email is a unique communication vehicle for a lot of reasons. However, email is not a substitute for direct interaction." Says Mr. Vehar: "Bill Gates agrees with me too."

TODD LIEF, an organizational development consultant, is himself a reformed quoter. He used to affix quotes to the end of his email ("Short history of ideas: Dreamed up by weirdos. Explored by artists. Validated by scientists. Swallowed by culture...")

Then he had a change of heart. "It dawned on me that the foot of an email might not be the best place for self-expression," he says.

That saves him from the quoting don'ts, like leaving a joke at the bottom of your email for too long. Or the rule for emotional quotes: It's worse to try to move someone and fail than never to have tried at all.

It also brings to mind words to live by from the company that brings us satirical quotes, Despair Inc.—"Get to work: You aren't being paid to believe in the power of your dreams."

But quoter Sean Doyle, founder of an advertising firm, who encourages his employees to use quotes to remind everyone that people have more dimension than business often allows, has sidestepped these problems. He avoids sentimentalism, and uses a program that automatically rotates his inventory of 24 quotes.

Me: "What made you rotate them?"
Mr. Doyle: "Familiarity breeds contempt."
Me: "Does your background in advertising predispose you to making a statement?"

Mr. Doyle: "Advertisements contain the only truths to be relied on in a newspaper. —Thomas Jefferson."



Steve Dinunno

Have you come across amusing or annoying signature lines in emails? Please send examples to jared.sandberg@wsj.com.