

It began with smiley

For good or ill, emoticons have become pervasive in e-mail

By MAUREEN MILFORD, *The News Journal*

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After Pat Sanders, an executive recruiter with The Network Group in Wilmington, arranged a plum interview for a job candidate for an \$80,000 to \$100,000 position, the candidate was so grateful he responded with a thank-you e-mail decorated with :) – the colon and a parenthesis that, read sideways, make a human smile.

Not appropriate, Sanders thought. “Keep the smiley face,” Sanders said. “Thanks is plenty.”

The use of emoticons – the text characters used to represent facial expressions, tone or feelings in the online world – just seems to rile the emotions in business communications. Known as smileys, the symbols will celebrate their 25th birthday on Wednesday. While some people see them as lazy communication and unsuited for the work world, others view them as a creative response to communicating in impersonal cyberspace. With plain-text communication, there are none of the signals – voice tone, gestures, facial expressions – by which human beings interpret emotion.



Scott Fahlman created the smiley in 1982.

To critics of emoticons, smileys impoverish the language because they become a substitute for good writing. Careful writers shouldn't have to label their comments. As author F. Scott Fitzgerald said: “An exclamation point is like laughing at your own joke.”

Jim Tevebaugh, an architect in Wilmington, agrees that proliferation of smileys reflects a lack of care with language. E-mail is more demanding when properly done, he said. If he saw people in his firm, Tevebaugh Associates, using emoticons in their correspondence, he would privately tell them to knock it off.

“I hate that crap,” Tevebaugh said. “It's so informal. It's like wearing a baseball cap in a restaurant.”

But Arthur B. Shostak, a futurist and professor emeritus of sociology at Drexel University in Philadelphia, sees them as “testimony to the creativity of humans who are endlessly trying to improve” their communications. He sees the use of smileys between colleagues as a “quite healthy” development in the age-old struggle to be more fully understood.

“It’s a timeless project. All refinements of communication are positive,” he said. “If it improves communication, it is to be welcome.”

Even smiley’s creator is dubious

Even the creator of the online smiley has mixed feelings. Scott E. Fahlman, a research professor of computer science at Carnegie Mellon University, first suggested using :-) on Sept. 19, 1982, as a joke marker after people at the university misinterpreted a post on an early electronic bulletin board.

He said in an e-mail interview it’s fun to have created something that people use and gives pleasure. He even gets a kick out of the fact emoticons send some people into “spasms of indignation.”

“It’s my little gift to the world. And, while I cringe when people over-use these emoticons, I think that the smiley has been a useful contribution to informal communication. I sometimes wish I could go back to the 1400s to compare notes with the guy who invented the exclamation mark,” Fahlman wrote.

While Fahlman says on his Web page he agrees to a large extent with critics of emoticons, it’s unfair to expect everyone to be a Shakespeare.

What’s more, online writing is a new medium with different properties that often allows instant response from readers into the same distribution channel as the original work. Misinterpretation of jokes or sarcasm online can result in firestorms.

“If the judicious use of a few smileys can reduce the frequency of such firestorms, then maybe it’s not such a bad idea after all,” Fahlman writes on his Web page. “Again, we’re talking here about casual writing on the Internet, not great works printed in one-way media that [are] relatively inaccessible to the general public.”

To Karissa Thacker, a psychologist in Rehoboth Beach, the larger issue is how technology will change the way human emotions are communicated and understood in the future. “Our non-verbal, face-to-face communication has always been so honest and not under our control. That is how people have read most of our emotions. With technology, we can control it more and fake it more,” Thacker said. “It’s new that we communicate emotions through technology, so it’s like a brand new language. We’re still figuring it out.”

Avoiding misunderstanding

To Fahlman, it’s strange to be better known for a “silly thing” he tossed off in 10 minutes than for his 35 years of research on artificial intelligence. He made his suggestion to use plain-text characters after someone on the bulletin board made a joke about contamination of an elevator in the physics department. Some people reading the post took it seriously.

The “elevator hoax,” as it was called, prompted a flurry of suggestions about how to mark jokes. Fahlman suggested the character sequence :-). It seemed like an “an elegant solution – one that could be handled by the ASCII-based computer terminals of the day.” In 2002, Microsoft Research unearthed the backup tape

with the original Fahlman post in 2002.

It read:

I propose that the following character sequence for joke markers: :-)

Read it sideways. Actually, it is probably more economical to mark things that are NOT jokes, given current trends. For this, use :-(

Smileys caught on at Carnegie Mellon, although :-(quickly became a symbol of unhappiness or displeasure. Within months they had spread to other universities and research labs, Fahlman writes.

From this humble beginning, emoticons have evolved into everything from text-based representations of Homer Simpson to animated cartoon smileys. Erin Jansen, founder of NetLingo.com in Santa Monica, Calif., an online dictionary that lists thousands of Internet terms, said the emoticons section is one of the most popular on her Web site.

“They definitely spice up normal Internet communication,” she said. “A lot people in the Internet industry use them. I have to say that people that have a [negative] emotional reaction to them are a little bit behind the times.”

‘A generational divide’

A July survey by Yahoo! Messenger, the company’s instant message application, found that 66 percent of the 40,000 respondents have memorized the text characters of three or more emoticons. Nineteen percent have memorized more than 10.

As might be expected, the biggest users of emoticons are people aged 19 to 25. Sixty-eight percent said they use them daily. Still, 48 percent of respondents over 50 use smileys every day.

“There is a generational divide,” Shostak said. “There are digital natives, or those people born after 1984, and digital immigrants, or the people born before 1984.”

Thacker said while she believes the use of emotions in business communication tends to make the sender look “less seasoned, less secure,” that could easily change. “Right now, it’s not a professional standard, but it wouldn’t surprise me if in five years from now they were standard procedure,” she said.

And even though some people believe emoticons project an image of immaturity or silliness, all types of communication say something about the sender, Shostak said. “A Hallmark card says one thing. A handwritten thank-you note, says something else,” Shostak said.

Bridget Gillespie Paverd, owner of BGP Publicity & Communication in Hockessin, said she gets e-mails from an executive at a nonprofit organization that contain smileys. But Paverd said she finds them charming because the executive is very effective in her job and a “genuinely likeable person.”

Jansen of NetLingo.com said “netiquette” dictates that the sender be aware of their relationship with the recipient.

“There are all kinds of businesses, and all kinds of communication within a business,” wrote emoticon creator Fahlman. “I don’t want to see smileys in any communication from my stockbroker, even if the

market is going up. And I certainly don't want to see 'You're fired! :-(- though 'You're fired! :-)- is even worse. But for internal communication – quick notes about small matters – emoticons can be useful and not out of place.”

Devona E.G. Williams of Goens Williams Associates Inc. in Clayton, a performance consulting company, said emoticons seem “immature” in a business context, but she has no problem with them in communication between friends. “It’s wonderful to have a shortcut,” Williams said.

Perhaps the creator of smileys should have the final word as the birthday approaches. “Maybe a good rule of thumb is that if either the sender or receiver of the message is likely to be wearing a tie (or female equivalent) when the message is sent or read, leave the emoticon out,” Fahlman e-mailed.

For himself, Fahlman has a new goal. He wants to do some piece of research that will impact people’s lives as much as the smiley. “And to keep smiling while I work on that. :-)” Fahlman wrote.

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A sampling of emoticons

?:^[] Jim Carrey	^o Yawning or snoring
& Kitty cleaning a hind paw	:-{} Wearing lipstick
@ @ @:-) Marge Simpson	%-\ Tired
8:-) Little girl	,-) Winking happy
:-# My Lips are Sealed	:O Surprised
X-(Mad	8> Penguin
:-# Has braces	P-(Pirate
5:-) Elvis	:“) Embarrassed
:-(*) Makes me sick	C=:-) Chef
%OD Laughing like crazy):-(- Frowning smiley with hair
:-C Real unhappy	:-! Foot in mouth
:-V Shouting	<:-1 Dunce
;^) Smirking	:-S Confused
=%-O Stared at a computer too long	q:-) Catcher
:-? Smoking a pipe	?-(- Black eye
:-Q Smoking while talking	