

# FAST COMPANY

## THE EMAIL PRESCRIPTION

SURE, THE WEB IS REINVENTING HOW COMPANIES interact with customers and how they do business with suppliers. But email remains the killer app of the Internet Age. It has reshaped how organizations work and how people work together. And, in the process, it has unleashed some killer headaches.

Our advice? Take two aspirin and call "Dr. Email" in the morning. Dr. Email is V.A. Shiva, 35, president and CEO of General Interactive Inc., a fast-growing company in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Shiva and his colleagues have created EchoMail — software that uses advanced pattern-recognition technology to read, store, classify, and log incoming messages. To install EchoMail, high-profile clients

IF YOUR COMPANY IS SO SMART, WHY IS IT SO DUMB WHEN IT COMES TO EMAIL?

"DR. EMAIL" HAS THE CURE FOR MANAGING THE NET'S KILLER APP. BY GINA IMPERATO

like Allstate, Nike, and Unilever have spent anywhere from \$150,000 to \$1 million, depending on the size of their networks and on the number of modules that they need. Why invest so much money to manage such a basic function?

"People who send email are trying to 'touch' your company," Shiva says. "Email carries attitude, it describes problems, it tells you who your customers are and what they're interested in. The email analysis that we do helps companies identify their customers' buying patterns and preferences. It can even predict their future behavior."

Shiva's company launched EchoMail in 1994. But his involvement with the medium goes back nearly 20 years. He was born in Bombay and moved to the United States when he was a young kid. In 1979, Shiva, a bored high-school junior in New Jersey, hooked up with an engineering project at Rutgers University. The project involved building one of the world's first email systems, and his work on it earned him the prestigious Westinghouse Science Talent Search Award, admission to MIT — and the Dr. Email nickname.



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These days, when Dr. Email discusses the prognosis for digital communication, his prescription includes three core principles.

The first principle: Email is everything. "Is there a form of communication that's better than email?" asks Shiva. "Digital interaction is the most targeted, flexible, and cost-effective form of communication on the planet. Email is a map to a company's past, present, and future. It enables immediate response and fast analysis."

Take General Interactive's work with Calvin Klein Cosmetics and the fragrance cK one. The marketing campaign for that product features a cast of characters (portrayed by models), each with his or her own email address. People who see the ads can send email messages to the characters — and, thanks to a customized version of EchoMail, those people receive fast, scripted responses that invite more interaction. "Email lets Calvin Klein build brand loyalty and do reality checks with customers very quickly," Shiva says. "It helps the company keep a finger on the pulse of the public."

Shiva's second principle: The more the messier. One email message to a company

offers the prospect of a simple and useful exchange. Thousands of email messages can be a source of frustration and confusion to senders and recipients alike. And not just because of the volume: The dirty little secret of email is that customers often don't send their message to the department best equipped to handle it. A simple problem might require input from several departments in order to produce a useful response.

Nike, a General Interactive customer that installed EchoMail as part of its Web operation, is a case in point. "Even though the Web team bought the software," says Shiva, "people in Nike's call centers were using it more than anyone else was. Why? Because email is so easy to send, customer-care reps weren't just getting questions about defective shoes. They were also getting questions about special events or about Nike's labor policies — issues better handled by marketing or public relations. The people sending email didn't care which department answered their question. They just wanted to hear from 'Nike.' So, before Nike could do a great job of responding to email, it had to address lots of organizational issues."

Shiva's third principle: What goes out is as important as what goes in. One reason why so many of General Interactive's clients are eager to do better at analyzing incoming messages is that they want to get smarter at responding to customers. Along with sending out better-crafted answers to questions, they want to use email to increase sales. And that means thinking as much about email design as about email content.

After all, you can't harness people's imagination until you capture their attention. That's why Shiva and his colleagues believe that more and more email will become multimedia email — complete with sound, video, and design. Zoe Helene, 34, General Interactive's chief creative officer, spends her time designing email campaigns that draw inspiration from the arts as well as from artificial intelligence. "These days," she says, "form is as important as function. Email is a way that you present yourself to people who are important to you, and you should care about how you appear to them."

Shiva agrees: "We've got artists, 3-D animators, and Web designers here," he says. "Combining the art and technology of email is the next great frontier."

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