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An Accidental Email Bonds a Group of Strangers Waiting for Couches

A retailer alerted customers about a delay, mistakenly copying in all their email addresses. The reply-all conversation broadened. 'That's when things got really interesting.'

by Katherine Bindley

Jeff DeMars placed an order for a Cobble Hill Hannah sofa in Dragonfly (translation: green) from ABC Carpet & Home in November. Earlier this week, the 32-year-old program coordinator from Brooklyn received an email from the furniture retailer, signed by its CEO, alerting him that his sofa would be delayed until May.

He looked at the "CC" field and saw 204 other email addresses. His fellow customers weren't invisibly BCC'd, but there on display.

So began the great couch conversation of 2021, with hundreds of strangers suddenly linked by their lack of a new sofa.

"It was pretty immediate that I was like, oh this is clearly a mistake," says Mr. DeMars. "I didn't have any plans for the evening so I figured, oh I might as well follow this and see where it goes."

There were some inquiries about being refunded for shipping, says Mr. DeMars, but "no one really said 'please remove me' right away."

Then out of nowhere, he says, someone named Zoe mentioned she was single and looking for a Jewish man: "That's when things got really interesting," Mr. DeMars says.

The accidental CC, a staple of office email culture for decades, typically sets off a cascade of intentional and unintentional reply-alls that drive its recipients mad: Otherwise smart people start asking, "Why am I getting these emails?" —which makes others on the thread demand to be taken off this list. That begets additional reply-alls telling everyone else to STOP REPLYING ALL. A comedian in the group usually seizes the opportunity like open-mic night.

The phenomenon is a frustrating spectacle of technological absurdity. But 13 months into the pandemic, this particular chain ended up bonding strangers and breaking the monotony of the 54th consecutive Tuesday night when no one had anything better to do.

Carolyn Ramo, 41, says that as the director of a nonprofit, she's fastidious about communication and has a very busy inbox, so she was initially irritated by the arrival of the emails. The should-be owner of the Cobble Hill Boutique sofa in Brussels Midnight (also known as navy) made that known in her own reply to the chain. That didn't stop others from adding their own replies, more than 150 in total, group members estimate.

"I wrote, 'Yes it's really insane to not BCC,'" Ms. Ramo says. "This is in all caps, exclamation point times six. Then I wrote, 'A real amateur-hour move.' Then I wrote, 'You should give us all free shipping.'"

But once she was done with work that day, Ms. Ramo saw a reply from a woman who suggested everyone be more understanding given the pandemic. Hadn't they ever had a bad day? That, along with an offer from a woman who said the group was welcome to hit her up if they needed any tile, made Ms. Ramo see the emails as less of a nuisance.

The tone shifted, Ms. Ramo says, away from couches and delivery times to other matters.

People started offering to set up Zoe on dates. One member of the email chain wondered if the group could manage to get Zoe engaged before their couches arrived. A few group members began taking screen shots of the emails to document the freewheeling exchange, which The Wall Street Journal reviewed.

Eventually chatter turned to all getting together one day, perhaps at one of their homes or at Zoe's wedding.

Another respondent requested additional details to help the search for a groom: Was Zoe looking for someone Reform, Orthodox or Reconstructionist? An ABC customer on the thread from Seattle said a brother-in-law in Brooklyn was game for being set up.

Someone else chimed in to say she went from "extremely pissed off" to "feeling a degree of human connectedness with strangers" she hadn't felt in a year.

Ms. Ramo devoured the replies. "We heard more about people's pets," she said. Someone's cat, Spanky, had recently passed away and said the new couch was meant to help with the grief. Spanky had destroyed two couches and a loveseat from the same store.

Ms. Ramo suspects that because many of the customers are New Yorkers, herself included, they're hungry for the kinds of happenstance interactions with strangers that, pre-pandemic, occurred when people were out and about. She says that she plans to set Zoe up with her tennis coach. (Her tennis coach doesn't know this yet.)

A subset of replies to the thread focused on the ABC fabric swatches some customers received before ordering their sofas: It turns out they double nicely as coasters. Multiple people emailed photos of drinks on their respective swatch-coasters. One noted that the group now knew how the upholstery held up to "repeated exposure to moisture" but wondered if velvet was the best choice.

Katie Bartasevich, 42, says that because she ordered her Cobble Hill Brownstone sectional in Theater Stream (grey) after seeing it in person, she didn't take a fabric swatch home. When she saw pictures of the coasters, she felt left out. "Apparently I missed out on the coaster trend," she posted to Instagram. She shared this and other observations over 2½ hours on Tuesday night, relaying the doings of the ABC chain to her followers.

"People are now starting to sign their emails with what couch they ordered," she wrote. Someone named Karen sought design advice from the email group, asking whether the Geo armchair in Creta 92 (neon yellowish) would go nicely with the couch she had ordered in Vance Rose (pink) velvet.

“These emails came in and one was better than the next,” says Ms. Bartasevich, who works in advertising and lives in Manhattan.

After posting 30 or so email screenshots to an Instagram story until 11 that night, Ms. Bartasevich says she had to stop. Before doing so, she was contacted by her friend’s fiancé, who works for the dating app Hinge. The Hinge employee offered complimentary premium memberships to anyone on the email thread who was single. Ms. Bartasevich notified the group and heard back from six women taking her up on the offer.

Gus Goldsack, 34, a product manager from Brooklyn, initially replied to the thread with a quick joke about how he would look forward to meeting everyone at Zoe’s wedding. But as he got sucked into the thread, he kept seeing people comparing timelines for how long they had been waiting for their sofas and could see there was some genuine frustration.

About 80 emails in, he started to feel a pang of guilt. He replied all. “The weight of feeling like a fraud in this group is too much to bear,” he wrote. He had to “come clean.”

“I got the sofa in February,” Mr. Goldsack says. “It’s beautiful. I love it.”

He confessed to the email chain. Along with his confession, Mr. Goldsack included a photo of his Cobble Hill Brownstone sofa in Theater Stream (with matching ottoman) and his cats, Fred and Didi, curled up on it. He told the group it was worth the wait. Someone replied that the group’s future get-together would have to be at Mr. Goldsack’s apartment, because he was the only one with a place to sit.

ABC Carpet & Home sent the entire group an apology note the day after the initial email.

“Mistakes are a part of being human—it’s what you do with them that matters,” said the note. ABC thanked customers for turning the mistake around for the greater good. In a post-script, the company added it was sorry to hear about Spanky the cat and that it was rooting for Zoe.

An ABC spokeswoman said the CC on the original email was “human error.”

Like many retailers and manufacturers, ABC has experienced delays. The ABC spokeswoman said the hold up was due in part to factories shutting down during the pandemic, then reopening at reduced capacities. Surges in demand for home products also contributed, she said, in addition to supply issues with raw materials.

Several of the ABC customers from the reply-all chain say the best part of being on the thread is that some of its members started a GoFundMe page to buy furniture for a family that has suffered during the pandemic. The coordination of that effort has been moved from email to Slack.

Zoe declined to comment.