

## Want an honest answer, get it from a letter

### WATERCOOLER

Erin Conroy

**L**IAR, LIAR, PANTS ON FIRE: If you want an honest answer from a colleague, try asking the question in a letter rather than e-mail.

A recent study at Lehigh University found that people feel more comfortable lying in electronic messages than other kinds of communication, like pen and paper.

"We've known from other research that people react differently in e-mail than they do face-to-face, but this shows that intentional deception online may be a behavioral norm," said Liuba Belkin, co-author of the study and an assistant professor of management at Lehigh University.

Researchers gave full-time MBA students fake money to divide between themselves and another fictional party. Using either e-mail or pen-and-paper communications, the students reported the size of the pot — truthful or not — and how much the other party would get.

Less than 10 percent of those who used e-mail were truthful about the amount of money to be divided, while about 40 percent were honest in the pen-and-paper scenario.

"There's an anonymity that people seem to think they have in e-mail," said Terri Kurtzberg, an associ-

ate professor of management and global business at Rutgers University, who conducted the study with Belkin and Charles Naquin of DePaul University. "There's a psychological block and this feeling that speaking to someone online is just chitchat,

Please see **CONROY**, Page B2 while documenting something on paper feels more formal. But we know it's just the opposite: E-mails are easier to trace and harder to erase."

**LAYOFF SURVIVOR BLUES:** The economy is in a downward spiral, and layoffs and the unemployment rate are at their highest levels in years.

At companies where job cuts are inevitable, employers need to prepare for the negative impact on the "survivors," according to Sirota Consulting LLC.

Greater employee insecurity, higher stress and heavier workloads often follow massive layoffs, says Douglas Klein, president of Sirota. When people lose their co-workers and friends, the emotional response often includes anger, concern, anxiety, guilt and depression.

"Whether they're verbalizing it or not, the surviving employees are questioning how much the company is

valuing them," Klein said. "Employers have to have a strategy that's transparent and be as specific as they can to communicate what's going on. Don't try to sneak people ... out the back door."

Even if the employer is feeling guilty, the company should be as honest as possible about future layoffs, Klein said.

"Only offer genuine reassurances; don't get caught up in telling them they're fine if you're not sure," he said. "Don't let your understandable emotional reaction get in the way of honesty."

**CREATIVE PR:** Business is slow, but your budget doesn't allow much wiggle room for advertising.

If you're tapping your fingers waiting for customers, perhaps tapping them on a keyboard could get the ball rolling for your small business. Public relations and communications firm **Cher Murphy PR LLC** offers these tips for promoting a service or product online, without breaking the bank:

- **Jump on the Web.** If your company doesn't have a Web site, now is the time to create one. Site-builder services can make it cheap and easy.

- **Blog.** If you can attract a readership, blogging may be the perfect way to showcase your business. Many sites offer free blogging accounts, while others charge only a few dollars.

- **Be an amateur videographer.** Creating and posting a low-cost, informative video on YouTube can drive traffic to your Web site.

- **Seek press.** Make it a goal to send out at least one news release a month to your local paper.



• **Network.** There are online networking sites that make it simple to connect with other professionals or companies, getting the word out about your own ventures.

*Erin Conroy is a columnist for the Associated Press. He covers business issues — both large and small.*