

Modern Communication – A Survival Guide

Today, we're all blessed - or cursed- with any number of ways to share information: telephones, voice mail, e-mail, and faxes are everywhere. And chances are that the people you need to communicate with have access to all of these and more. The idea of media choice has become a reality, and more and more, it's not what you say but how and where you say it that gets your message across.

By using the appropriate media correctly, you're most likely to get your message noticed and acted upon. This will help others distill the important information from your message, prioritize their own messages and act on them.

But whatever messaging medium you choose, keep in mind:

- The most effective messages are short and to-the-point, so be precise and efficient when sending messages.
- Think through what you want to say before leaving a message.
- Introduce lengthy messages with a summary.
- Mention the most compelling information first.
- As much as possible, stick with single topics for simple messages so others can respond quickly.
- We all deal with information overload at times- help people out by sending messages only to those who have an interest in what you're saying, can make a contribution, or really need to know.
- Above all, treat the messages you receive just as you'd like recipients to handle the messages you send.

Fax

When facsimile first came into the workplace, it was considered a lifesaver - for the first time, information could be delivered immediately. At the time, this huge benefit outweighed any of fax's limitations - poor document quality, distribution time to others, hardware maintenance, difficulty tracking down fax numbers for travelers, or busy signals, for example.

Traditional fax messaging lets us convey detailed information (like maps or directions) quickly, doesn't require transcription, and can be reviewed quickly. But fax machines, which are often in communal spaces, are definitely not meant for private documents. Most organizations have a single fax machine for 20 or 30 people, so senders often have trouble transmitting a fax, and employees must check the communal system frequently, or rely on co-

workers to receive faxes. And fax documents must be copied for distribution, often losing legibility in the process. One of fax messaging's greatest drawbacks is in reaching increasingly mobile workers: senders must know where the recipient is, which often requires a separate phone call to get the number of a fax machine.

Ten years ago, every fax was important, but today, a fax can go unread for days. For this reason, many people will call or leave a voice message to alert the recipient of an incoming fax - making two calls when one should suffice. But the increasing implementation of voice/fax mailboxes is making the use of fax more efficient and effective. Voice/fax mail not only alerts the recipient to a waiting fax, but enables him or her to retrieve the fax from any location, and ensures privacy when required. Voice/fax also eliminates fax machine hardware problems and busy signals, and allows senders to mark their messages as urgent for more timely responses.

E-mail

E-mail took a little longer to make its way into the mainstream of office communications. In fact, until recently, e-mail was often limited to random pockets of users within organizations, rather than being implemented throughout the company. Its recent explosion can be tied to the growth and awareness of the Internet.

E-mail is great for both detailed information or simple messages; it lets recipients automatically respond to the sender, regardless of location or system type, and messages can be easily printed or saved for future reference. With e-mail, documents don't need to be printed before they are sent, and you can easily send a single message to multiple recipients. Recipients can quickly review e-mail messages to identify pertinent information and write introductions or edit messages before forwarding them.

But e-mail messages-- even simple text messages -take time to compose. And e-mail may not be readily accessible when recipients are out of the office. If an e-mail message is urgent, many senders end up alerting the recipient via voice mail or a phone call, rather than relying on e-mail alone.

Voice Mail

Voice mail is probably the most universally implemented medium, given the ubiquity of the telephone and the fact that voice is the communication medium humans use most and are most comfortable with. A voice message provides nuance, personality, or humor, subtleties that are lost with fax or e-mail. Voice messages are quick to compose and send, and offer multiple delivery options (urgent, private, delayed delivery, etc.), as well as forwarding capabilities. Unlike fax and e-mail, voice mail systems can be easily accessed by local, remote, or mobile subscribers via landline or cellular phones. And when integrated with fax, voice mail offers subscribers the best of both technologies.

Suppliers are striving to make voice messaging easier and more seamless. But even voice mail has limitations. A voice message makes it harder to review and distill pertinent information, especially if the message is long and transcription of information is required. And voice mail cannot provide the subscriber with a hard copy of a message.

Unified Messaging

Today, many companies are facing choices in how they want messages handled and delivered, and are exploring the integration of different messaging media to enable users to more effectively manage their communications. A number of voice messaging suppliers already have products that integrate voice, fax, and e-mail capabilities, letting users either hear or view messages using a phone or pc. These systems have the added benefit of enabling subscribers to organize and prioritize all their communications in a single place.

Eventually, senders will be able to transmit all types of messages from any number of devices. Similarly, recipients will have a single repository for all messages -whether voice or data - and be able to access messages from their device of choice, which could be anything from a standard touchtone phone to wireless personal communications device.

But none of these advances will eliminate the importance of media choice - in fact, they make it all the more critical. So next time you need to communicate information (short of making a phone call) think about the best and most effective way to get your message across.

Choosing The Right Medium For Your Message

Next time you need to send a message, think about what you want to convey and how you want the recipient to respond before you send it. For example, if you want someone to review and edit a detailed report, send it via e-mail; but if you're just looking for a yes or no answer to a simple question, voice mail is your best bet.