COMMUNICATION

Research: Type Less, Talk More

by Amit Kumar and Nicholas Epley

October 05, 2020

LAL/Getty Images

Modern communication media allow us to exchange information with others using text, voice, and audiovisual cues. But because communication also involves maintaining social relationships that are critical for our happiness, health, and the smooth running of a business, reaching out to others requires deciding how best to do so. And in this regard, the value of voice is key. We recently conducted several experiments that suggest people undervalue the positive relational consequences of using voice relative to text alone, leading them to favor typing rather than talking—a potentially unwise preference.

In one experiment, for instance, we asked people to think of an old friend they had not interacted with in a while, but with whom they would like to reconnect. These people then imagined how these interactions would make them feel if they typed to their old friend (over email) or talked to their old friend (over the phone). Results were mixed. Although people expected to feel more connected to their old friend when talking compared to typing, they also expected to feel more awkward when talking compared to typing. When they were asked to choose which media they would prefer to use, the anticipated costs of talking seemed to loom large: The majority said they would rather just type to their old friend.

These concerns, however, were unwarranted. We know because we then randomly assigned these people to reconnect with their old friend either by typing (over email) or by talking (over the phone). As these people expected, they did feel more connected to their old friend after talking than after typing. Contrary to expectations, however, there was no difference in how awkward they felt after talking rather than typing. Misplaced fears of an awkward interaction, it appears, can lead to a mistaken preference for typing rather than talking.

Emails and phone calls may now seem like ancient technology to some, especially now that the COVID-19 pandemic has made videoconferencing a part of many people's daily routines, especially at work. But adding video to an "old-fashioned" phone call may not further increase our sense of connection to another person, as another of our experiments suggests.

In this case, we asked people to connect with a stranger by discussing several meaningful questions (e.g., "Is there something you've dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven't you done it?"), either by texting in real time during a live chat, talking using only audio, or talking over video chat. Participants first told us how they expected they would feel during the interaction that they were about to have, and then they reported how they actually felt after having had their interaction. Before the interaction, they did not seem to expect that

how they communicated with the person would affect how connected or awkward they would feel, but once again, they actually felt more connected (and no more awkward) after talking rather than typing.

Being able to see another person, in short, did not make people feel any more connected than if they simply talked with them. A sense of connection does not seem to come from being able see another person but rather from hearing another person's voice. This is consistent with several other findings suggesting that a person's voice is really the signal that creates understanding and connection.

It's important to keep our experimental results in perspective. They don't necessarily suggest you should always be picking up the phone and talking to your colleagues and friends. Text-based interactions are sometimes simpler and more efficient and enable recipients to respond at their leisure. If you're sending a simple message, a quick update, or an attachment, then emails and texts are the way to go. But our data suggest that you're apt to overestimate how awkward it will feel to talk on the phone, or to underestimate how connected that will make you feel—and as a result you may send text-based messages when voice would be more beneficial. So, take a little more time to talk to others than you might be inclined to. You—and those you talk to—are likely to feel better as a result.

Amit Kumar is an assistant professor of marketing and psychology at the University of Texas at Austin.

Nicholas Epley is the John Templeton Keller Professor of Behavioral Science at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. He studies social cognition to understand why smart people routinely misunderstand each other.

This article is about COMMUNICATION

Follow This Topic