

Title:

5 New Communication Technologies To Supplement Email

Word Count:

1369

Summary:

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Keywords:

communication technologies,email,web 2,web 2.0

Article Body:

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THE BENCHMARK - FACE-TO-FACE

There's no doubt that face-to-face communication is the most effective method for most people. Why? Because of its two-way nature. It's about dialogue. Listeners are not passive participants. When someone talks to us, we send a continuous stream of responses back to them. Some are verbal, but many/most are not. These responses have the power to actually change the message being disseminated by the talker. What's more, they have the power to change how other listeners' interpret that message. (Similarly, other listeners have the power to change your interpretation.)

Unfortunately, however, the global nature of business makes it impossible to conduct face-to-face meetings for every communication. So what are the

alternatives? Specifically, what are the alternatives offered by technology?

EMAIL - THE STARTING POINT

The benefits of email are numerous and well known, and include (but are not limited to):

- Email is an excellent mechanism for distributing information to people. It is fast and cost effective.
- It is incredibly convenient - you can readily communicate across time zones.
- It provides a useful electronic paper trail.
- It can save a great deal of time because most of the fluff surrounding a phone call (the social niceties) are seen as unnecessary in email.
- It allows recipients to read and respond to messages in their own time.
- The wording, grammar and punctuation in an email can be considered and edited before finally sending.

But email does have its limitations:

- Its lack of social niceties is a double-edged sword. Without the benefit of other communication cues, it's sometimes hard to interpret the tone of an email, and this can make some messages ambiguous.
- It isn't ideal for critical communication. For many people, emails are not 'real-time' communication. We all have that unaddressed email sitting at the bottom of the list. Because emails are so easy to ignore, they're also easy to forget.
- Ironically, email's dissemination effectiveness has been one of the major impediments to its communication effectiveness. It's so easy to send emails - and they're so anonymous - that our inboxes are now flooded with SPAM. Consequently, emails are viewed with some suspicion. It's sometimes hard to identify legitimate emails, but it's very easy to just hit Delete.
- Because email senders are typically geographically (and often culturally) distant from their recipients, they have no immediate visual and aural cues to help them tailor the message as they type.

But there's no need to 'throw out the baby with the bathwater'. Email is an

excellent solution to many communication needs. And for those it is ill-equipped to handle, there are newer, more appropriate technologies that are built for the job...

WEB 2.0 TECHNOLOGIES - THE PERFECT SUPPLEMENT

Web 2.0, a term coined by O'Reilly Media (an American media company) in 2004 refers, to a second-generation of internet-based services that let people collaborate and share information online in new ways.

Web 2.0 technologies are well defined in www.wikipedia.org, which suggests that these sites allow the users of the sites (members) to create and share content, including exploring and discussing ideas, opinions, initiatives and issues. Web 2.0 is all about communication. It is the evolution of the internet from an endless library of static pages to an endless world of conversations. These pages can be restricted to particular individuals (eg the executive), or open to all members. The only difference is that the interaction takes place in cyberspace, and those taking part can be sitting behind a keyboard just about anywhere on the planet.

Importantly, a reader's understanding of the message in a Web 2.0 communication is determined, not just by the publisher, but also by the responses (e.g. comments) of the audience. What's more, the publisher's actual message tends to be far more fluid as it, too, is informed by the responses of the audience. In other words, Web 2.0 services are far more like face-to-face conversations than any communication technology before them.

So what are these emerging technologies that we should be keeping an eye on? The two most notable are 'Wikis' and 'Blogs'. The following definitions are from <http://www.wikipedia.org>, an online encyclopaedia developed as a wiki.

- Wikis - A wiki is a type of website that allows users to easily add, remove or otherwise edit and change content. This ease of interaction and operation makes a wiki an effective tool for collaborative authoring. Examples include Wikipedia (wikipedia.com) and wikiwikiweb (<http://www.wikiwikiweb.com>).

- Blogs - A weblog, which is usually shortened to blog, is a type of online diary or journal which allows one to voice their opinion on something. Blogs often provide commentary or news and information on a particular subject. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media. Blogs are usually text based, but they can include photographs, videos or audio (podcasting). Blogs can be presented in a way that creates a conversation between users. As an example, see the Sydney Morning Herald travel blog

(<http://blogs.smh.com.au/lostintransit/>).

THE USES OF WEB 2.0

As with face-to-face social gatherings and forums, online get togethers attract a broad spectrum of participants eager to engage, entertain, befriend, advise and lecture.

It was reported in The Australian (Tuesday 8 August 2006) that the social computing element of Web 2.0 has recently been embraced by the US Government. The US State Department has started including blogs and other Web 2.0 concepts to deliver public information to citizens. It is also using wiki style services to improve information by permitting small expert communities to improve advisory services.

The same article advised that Australia's leading information advisory body, the Australian Government Information Management Office, had begun experimenting with the use of blogs, wikis and other Web 2.0 technologies.

As new online social networks mushroom, they are becoming increasingly focused on niches, ideally suited to membership based organizations and the NFP sector. Examples of general public social networks include My Space (<http://www.myspace.com>), Classmates (<http://www.classmates.com>) and Bikely (bikely.com).

OTHER USEFUL TECHNOLOGIES

- SMS - Short Message Service (SMS) is a service available on most digital mobile phones (and other mobile devices, e.g. a Pocket PC, or occasionally even desktop computers) that permits the sending of short messages between mobile phones, other handheld devices and even landline telephones.
- Podcast - Podcasting is the method of distributing multimedia files, such as audio or video programs, over the internet using syndication feeds, for playback on mobile devices and personal computers.
- Webinars - Web conferencing is used to hold group meetings or live presentations over the internet. In the early years of the internet, the terms "web conferencing" and "computer conferencing" were often used to refer to group discussions conducted within a message board (via posted text messages), but the term has evolved to refer specifically to "live" or "synchronous" meetings, while the posted message variety of discussion is called a "forum", "message board", or "bulletin board". A webinar is a seminar which is conducted over the

World Wide Web. It is a type of web conferencing. In contrast to a Webcast, which is transmission of information in one direction only, a webinar is designed to be interactive between the presenter and audience. A webinar is 'live' in the sense that information is conveyed according to an agenda, with a starting and ending time. In most cases, the presenter may speak over a standard telephone line, pointing out information being presented on screen, and the audience can respond over their own telephones, preferably a speakerphone. Whilst not necessarily considered Web 2.0, Webinars can also be a useful mechanism for information distribution and discussion amongst membership based organizations and SMS can provide important or urgent confirmations.

CONCLUSION

Email is - and will continue to be - an incredibly useful and convenient communication tool. In fact, with the emergence of new technologies that are either more direct, more immediate, or more like face-to-face communication, email is improved. As businesses supplement their email usage with other communication technologies, email will be increasingly reserved for those communications to which it is ideally suited.