

Phone or Email: That's my Dilemma

By Jesse Yoder

This is a short opinion piece that looks at the relative value of communication by phone vs. communication by email from a human perspective. First it recounts two phone conversations, and then an email relationship. It then looks at the pros and cons of each method.

Conversation with Bill

Yesterday I called someone that I've known off and on over the past ten years or so. I was somewhat surprised that he actually answered his phone. This is all too rare these days. I'll call him Bill.

This was a fairly routine call. I was calling to find out if the company has any press releases that I could use for our new Worldflow product. I needed some information on thermal flowmeters for a section on flow technologies. "Can you hold for a minute?" he said. I went "OK," and proceeded to hold for three or four minutes.

Finally Bill came back on the line. "Can I call you back. I have a train of people here waiting for me. Unless you want to hold awhile longer." "I'll be the caboose," I replied. "Call me back later."

The caboose thing seemed to blow right past him. "Where are you?" he said.

"Wakefield, Massachusetts," I replied.

"So you must work late."

"I was here till 11:00 last night."

"OK, bye."

"Bye."

Bill called back the next day. Somehow the question of how long he'd been at that position came up. "I've been here 21 years," he said. Ya've gotta respect that. Then we started talking about September 11. Bill went "I flew to Germany for Interkama (a trade show) a week after September 11. There was nobody there." I didn't bother volunteering that I spent three days and 30 hours driving from Houston to Boston after September 11. Bill pointed out correctly that our president said it was safe to fly. "Sometimes you have to put on your brass jockstrap." The conversation then switched to market research. "Information means a lot."

Bill is someone I don't know very well. Yet talking to him on the phone brought back a flood of memories and associations, presumably from previous conversations. I could tell he was in a good mood, and interacting with him lifted my spirits too.

Conversation with Tom

Flash backward to another conversation with another person, who I will call Tom. I'm working with Tom to jointly develop a new product with his company. He first sent me an email expressing interest, so I called him back.

In our conversation, I found that, as we talked, we together developed the idea of a product where we could each make substantial contribution. This was an idea that was only vaguely formulated at first. It only emerged in the give and take of conversation, as each of us with our different points of view elucidated our idea of what this product would look like.

A week later, I called him back, and we had a similar experience. We further developed the idea over the phone. We are now ready to move ahead.

Emails with Steve

Let's contrast these two conversations with someone else I mostly deal with by email. This is someone that I've been working with for over three years. I'll call him Steve. I correspond with him almost exclusively by email. Sometimes several months go by without a phone conversation. Our emails mainly have to do with schedules for the flow studies, clients who have ordered the studies, and payment-related issues.

Sometimes I feel the need to talk to him on the phone. Why do I feel this need? It could be because I need an immediate decision about something. However, it's more likely to be because I have an idea I'd like to explore. Perhaps it's an issue related to writing a study, or a marketing idea. Whatever it is, I would prefer to discuss on the phone, rather than write an email about.

When I have this feeling, I usually call the company and ask to talk to Steve. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, he's "in a meeting," so I leave a message. My hope is that he will call me back.

Instead of a callback, if I get any response, I get an email. I think there are two reasons for this. One is that he prefers the intellectual exercise of writing out an email to making a telephone call. It's a lot less threatening, and doesn't require any actual human interaction. Secondly, I'm the caboose in his mind. I'm so low on his priority list that he doesn't even try to contact me unless he's cleared away all his other "important" tasks. And apparently he has a lot of those.

This drives me up a wall. I have the idea in my head that people should respond in the way they were contacted. So if someone send you a letter, send them a letter back. If they call you, the correct thing is to call them back. Obviously Steve doesn't grasp this concept. Or, if he does, he doesn't apply it to me.

Pros and Cons of Phones vs. Emails

The accounts of the above three conversations display a couple of good and bad features of phones and emails. If you call someone and they're busy or don't want to talk to you, they will invariably claim to be "in a meeting" and have you leave a message. Then you may or may not get a callback. Chances are good you won't.

Emails have at least four advantages:

a) You can send them and it doesn't matter what the other person is doing – he'll still get the message. Emails are also good in that you can send an email to someone and it has minimal impact on them. It may cause a bell to ring on their computer (you've got mail!), but otherwise it doesn't interrupt what they're doing.

b) Emails can also be good in dealing with people from another country, who write and read your language better than they speak it. I have Japanese clients that I've done large projects for, and we always seem to communicate better by email.

c) Time is not an issue for emails. You can send an email anytime during the day or night, and the other person can be asleep when they receive it.

d) Email fosters conversations among groups of people because it's easy to copy people on an email.

Why I don't like emails

With all these advantages, who's complaining? I recognize that emails are important, and I will probably continue to use them, at least until they are replaced by a new and better technology.

Still, I don't like emails, and here's why.

1. Ninety percent of the emails I receive are spam. Because emails are essentially free, anyone who has access to a computer can send them at no charge. Imagine if it was free to mail a letter. The resulting burden on the post office, which is already overburdened, would be overwhelming. What's more, the vast majority of these emails are computer-generated. They are not the result of any human being trying to reach you. They are the result of your being on a list to receive some impersonal communication.

2. Emails take the personality out of communication. Emails are a means of self-expression. However, no actual interaction with another human being is required with emails. You write the email out, send it, and the other person reads it. It's as if we all walked around with tape recorders. Instead of talking directly to another person, we talk into our tape recorder, then give it to them to play back. They listen to the tape, record their own reply, and give it back to you.

3. It is possible to work out an idea over time in a collaborative way with another person. However, the dynamic that exists when two people are discussing a subject isn't there. A phone conversation is like a tennis match, with ideas being tossed back and forth. An email conversation is more like a bowling match.

4. Email is a left-brain, head-oriented way of communicating. When someone writes an email, they are communicating from their head. You can't touch another person via email, and neither can you see the expression on their face. When you write an email, you are forced to be logical. It is possible to express feelings via email, but they have to be funneled through language. You can't smile via email. Much of self-expression is non-verbal, and emails don't have a category for those things, apart from sending pictures. But a picture is an external representation, it's not from the heart.

So what's the alternative to using emails? How about a telephone call? Or an in-person visit. Or whatever happened to letter writing? Is that too old-fashioned today in our computerized world.

Personally, I've resolved to use the telephone a lot more, and to only use emails when it's absolutely necessary. Maybe I'll be able to have some human interaction again for a change.

For comments, please send an email to jesse@flowresearch.com (ha ha).