

# Balanced Communication

For salespeople, technology can be as hindering as it is helpful. To avoid getting tangled in the wires, you must first accept that these tech tools are here to stay and then learn how to best use them in ways that benefit both you and your clients. **By Rick Davis**



arrival of even more instantaneous communication tools that allow individuals to call orders in from jobsites directly over their cell phones. Additionally, PDA devices such as BlackBerries or Palm Pilots enable e-mail communications from remote locations.

Certainly, all these new tools have made our jobs and lives easier. But they also have made them more complicated. Ironically, while these evolving technologies have streamlined processes, they also have made business life much more complex than anyone would have imagined because none has rendered another obsolete. Orders often are still placed in handwritten form. They are also submitted by fax, by phone, through e-mail, via electronic data transfer, and from handheld PDA devices, and will soon be submitted from computers that are linked to global tracking devices.

Many salespeople clearly have failed to adapt with the pace of change. For example, there are those that are still uncomfortable using e-mail. One sales representative I know at a large organization failed to check his e-mail for three months because he did not like computers; the result was a lost customer and several bid opportunities (implying that perhaps his employer should have left the e-mail address off his business card until they knew he was actually using it).

More significant evidence is provided by the costly failure of salespeople to provide adequate contact information on their business cards. Of the many business cards I have seen in the past year, a large percentage do not have complete contact information, with many omitting e-mail addresses and thus eliminating one method by which

The technological revolution has changed the profession of selling in dramatic ways. While this hardly comes as a surprise to anyone, many of us have still failed to adapt to the challenges created by the technological revolution. In one generation of salespeople, the methods we use to communicate with customers have evolved so rapidly that many salespeople simply have not recognized that the profession has been impacted forever.

Twenty-five years ago, business was much simpler; salespeople typically filled out order forms that were mailed or delivered directly to the office. With the advent of a fax machine, people began sending orders in over the telephone wires, even if they were sometimes difficult to read when a roll of paper converted a multiple page order into a one-sheet communiqué. Soon, plain paper faxes solved this problem but were quickly replaced for many with the innovation of electronic data transfer, the method by which orders are placed directly into a vendor's computer system.

These methods pale in comparison to the recent



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# Sell Sheet

customers can communicate. Limited information means limited access, hardly the message a salesperson wants to project, and it essentially states to the customer or prospect, “If you want to do business with me, this is how I wish

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to be contacted.” And this is the crux of the matter: Salespeople should not expect to tell customers how to do business, but should instead be prepared to adapt to a client’s preferred method of communication.

I learned this lesson myself recently while working with the administrative department head for one of my clients.

He communicated with me exclusively by e-mail and yet I persistently tried calling him on the phone whenever I received his e-mails, hoping to speak live. I was becoming frustrated because it is not my preferred method of communication. Our relationship almost came to an end when his boss told me that things weren’t going well because they weren’t receiving information from me in a timely fashion. I instantly realized that my efforts to encourage communication on my terms were hampering the growth of

the relationship. Once I started engaging in “e-mail conversation,” things went smoother and the relationship was back on firm ground. Certainly other salespeople have suffered through the same learning process by resisting the change brought on by the technological revolution or, worse, failing to learn and losing a client.

On a more fundamental level, salespeople mismanage the use of technologies such as voicemail and e-mail so frequently that business productivity in general is hampered. Everyone has been victimized by the e-mail conversationalist that casually drops an electronic note to talk about even the most mundane topics, misusing e-mail as a conversation tool. Less obvious to some salespeople is the damage they do to their reputation by leaving poorly worded or rambling voicemails to prospects. In the end, your ability to utilize all the tools of the technological revolution will be key to your business survival.

## Managing Technology

In order to efficiently manage your communications in an evolving world of technology, consider the following:

1. **E-mail is not a conversation.** The language of text messaging has suddenly become so pervasive that

people are ignorant of the real people in the world around them. In the end, people buy from people. If you have a conversation to make, strive to make the personal touch by phoning or speaking face to face. Save e-mail communications to send documents, verify details of business, and communicate specific information relevant to business. Unless you are working with a client that wants to communicate exclusively by e-mail, use this tool judiciously.

## 2. Not every incoming communication is an emergency.

As more communication technologies evolve, you will continue to be bombarded with e-mails, voicemails, text messages, phone calls, and the like that will insist you take immediate action to resolve an “emergency.” Strive to be patient in the face of adversarial technology communications and remember not to create unnecessary emergencies for others.

## Sales Leaders balance their use of technology by embracing its power while, at the same time, not permitting it to control their lives.

3. **Cell phone activity is not necessarily productivity.** It’s that simple. Just talking on the phone does not translate into productivity. Find time to be quiet and plan. Reduce your dependence on always “being in touch” and strive to use the cell phone to create legitimate productivity.

4. **If you can fax it, you often can e-mail it.** Paper creates clutter and, in a complex world, the desire to become more organized is prevalent. Clarify with clients their preferred method for receiving information and utilize the fax only when appropriate.

5. **Embrace the changing technologies.** Communication technologies will become more complex,

not less, in coming years. Force yourself to become multilingual and fluent in the “languages” of phone, fax, and computer in a changing world, or you will risk losing more sales battles to multilingual competitors.

Sales Leaders recognize that the best way to manage technology is to let the technology work for them. They balance their use of technology by embracing its power while, at the same time, not permitting it to control their lives. Knowing how to use all the various forms of technology will give you an edge. But when all is said and done, remember that one sales communication tool will never become obsolete—the handshake. ■