



How to Maintain High-Touch Relationships in High-Tech Times

by Sarita Maybin

From Facebook to email and texting, technology has taken over as the primary means of communication. Yet conversations are still a crucial part of relationship-building, both professionally and personally. Here are some real-life strategies for maintaining high-touch relationships in these high-tech times.

The Magic Words

In the words of leadership guru John Maxwell, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

Yet it's sometimes hard to convey the warmth and caring we exude in person when we're communicating via email.

Here's an idea: Do a "please and thank you" check to make sure that you've included either or both of these words in your email. I've gotten in the habit of doing this right after a spellcheck.

"Please" and "thank you" are still the magic words ... and they can humanize your emails! For example, "Please respond by tomorrow at 5 p.m. Thanks!" sounds better than "Respond by tomorrow at 5 p.m."

While we want to make our emails personable, we don't want to go to the other extreme and send emails that appear too soft or powerless. Women more than men tend to use credibility-robbing

phrases like "I just" and "I'm sorry" in their in-person communication and online. Now we can do a "weak" word check using Google Chrome's new Just Not Sorry app.

Text-Talk

Jeremy Gutsche, innovation expert and founder of Trendhunters.com, said it best in a keynote speech last year: "Baby boomers have adapted to technology, Gen X has embraced technology, but millennials were imbedded with technology."

As such, there's probably a wide range of comfort levels and tech expertise on our teams at work.

Nevertheless, there are still some common shared expectations of technology use in the workplace. For example, it may be fun to use the latest text-talk acronyms when emailing and messaging our friends, yet it's best to keep them to a minimum when communicating professionally. Some of the following are common examples of text-talk. Which ones do you see commonly used in business emails? For

that matter, do you even know what some of these mean?

- LOL
- TMI
- OMG
- IKR
- IMHO
- GMTA
- IDK
- TTYL

If You Can't Say Something Nice...

We've all heard the expression, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." Yet it seems that the disconcerting current trend is "If you can't say something nice ... post it on Facebook, or tweet it, text it and send an email!" Yikes!

If we absolutely must express discontent online, we might want to consider my favorite wisdom: "Say what you mean, mean what you say, and don't say it mean!"

In fact, this is a good guideline to use in our face-to-face communication too.

In my 2012 TEDx Talk, "Communication Lessons Learned from Mom," I shared the importance of

making “one small adjustment” to say what you mean in a less mean manner: Replace the blaming “you” word with a take responsibility phrase using “I.”

For example, “I would appreciate,” “I would prefer” and “I’m concerned” have a more positive impact than “you better,” “you ought to” and “you always/never.”

As I shared in my presentation at the California Society of Association Executives’ 2016 ELEVATE conference in Coronado, there are some wrong ways and some right ways to share concerns ... in person or online. Here are a couple examples:

Wrong way: “You’re wrong”

Right way: “I have a different understanding” or “I heard something different”

Wrong way: “You should”

Right way: “You might want to consider”

Three Clues

Here are three clues that we might want to choose to call rather than email or text:

1. Numerous questions – I use the “rule of three.” When I’ve had to go back and forth to clarify or answer questions in an email volley three times, I call.

2. Sensitive subject – We’ve all heard the crazy stories of companies laying off and firing staff via email. However, there are far less severe — yet just as sensitive — situations that require a “real” conversation. Everything from delicate dilemmas (like negative feedback) to sharing not-so-nice news is best handled in person or, at the very least, on the phone.

3. Conflict resolution – Brainstorming, problem-solving, consensus-building and anything requiring a free-flowing exchange of ideas is best handled in real time. Fortunately, there are some high-tech alternatives, such as Skype and FaceTime, that come close.

Reader-Friendly

Hitting “reply all” when sending email is the number one most annoying high-tech office behavior according to the audiences I’ve surveyed during my communication presentations.

A close second is relentless ranting without ever really stating the purpose of the email. Here are a few tips to help you avoid being that person and to make your email communication more reader-friendly.

1. Specific subject line – Vague and general subject lines are more likely to be ignored, or worse, deleted. Consider the vague subject line “Tomorrow’s Meeting” versus the more specific “Planning Meeting Agenda.” Better yet, add an action item: “Input Requested: Planning Meeting Agenda” or “For Your Review: Planning Meeting Agenda.”

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2. Fonts, frills and nonverbals – I have a tedious tendency to put an exclamation mark — or two or three — at the end of every sentence. That could come across as shouting or melodramatic!!! OK, I’m still working on that one. Similarly, all caps can come across as shouting and even aggressive. Even though those who type with one finger attempt to justify this by saying it’s more convenient to keep the caps key on, the negative impact on the email recipient is still the same. Other online nonverbal distractions include fancy fonts, crazy colors and overuse of emojis/emoticons.

3. Bullets and brevity – Rather than writing a rambling report-style email with numerous paragraphs, state the reason for your email and then include bullet points or numbers. For example, “I appreciated your meeting with me, and I’d like to follow up with three additional thoughts.” Then list them ... 1, 2 and 3.

On a related note, there is a full-on movement — even a mandate — in some companies to encourage brief emails. To jump on the email brevity bandwagon, use the five sentences or fewer guideline and then put a related disclaimer at the bottom of your email. Learn more online at five.sentenc.es.

In summary, the key to maintaining high-touch relationships in high-tech times is to communicate with respect. This thought and the suggestions shared in this email are recapped in the following wrapup rhyme that

I sometimes use to sum up my high-touch/high-tech presentations.

High touch. High tech.
Communicate with respect.
LOL, TMI and OMG,
I can’t understand
what you’re saying to me.
Email, text and cell phone too
So many ways to talk to you!
The magic words are still
thank you and please
Even if you text and tweet with ease.
Bold fonts and all caps are email attitude
And texting while we’re talking
is just rude
Ditch the email and catch a clue
Pick up the phone if something is
bothering you.
If you can’t say something nice,
what DO you say?
Whatever it is, don’t post it
on Facebook today!
High touch. High tech.
Communicate with respect!

Sarita Maybin is an international speaker and communication expert whose audiences have fun learning how to stay positive, confront tough communication challenges and work together better! She is the author of the book If You Can’t Say Something Nice, What DO You Say? For more information, visit her website, SaritaMaybin.com. To receive her monthly email “Communiqué,” text SARITATALK to 22828.

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