

Communication and Connection in the Digital Age

by Mark Delany

Mark considers how digital technology not only influences but shapes the way we communicate with one another, as well as how we do business.

People now spend a full 24 hours per week online, that's according to the UK communications regulator, Ofcom. Perhaps an unsurprising figure on the surface, but then consider that across your lifetime, it means you will spend one fifth of all your waking time conducting your affairs via some form of digital proxy. Depending on your world view, that idea might delight, excite or terrify you. Regardless, there is little doubt that digital technology will continue to not only influence but shape the way we communicate with one another, as well as how we do business.

The pace of technological change is impossible to keep up with and often occurs at such a staggering speed that it is only when we step back and assess what has happened that we truly understand its significance. One example of this is that for most in the Western world, the phone has been our primary communications device for well over half a century. During the last ten years however, its basic utility has changed. Phones used to be for making calls. Now they are for countless other things, in fact Ofcom's equivalent here in Ireland, Comreg, has in recent years, consistently reported declines in the amount of time we spend making voice calls. Conversely, the volume of data our mobiles are consuming, to upload and download information, is growing exponentially, quadrupling in the last 4 years alone.

So, if we are calling less and emailing

or even instant messaging more, what does that mean for how we do business?

Time is precious. Make every moment count

Firstly, we know that scarcity is a driver of demand. If the amount of time we are spending in direct contact with one another is decreasing, then surely the value of this time increases? We are social beings after all and crave contact and interaction with one another. Understanding this makes it easy to see why practitioners are increasingly looking to develop their softer skills such as presentation or negotiation techniques or developing a personal brand. Investing in these areas can help drive real competitive advantage, maximising personal impact at the times that it matters most.

It's good to talk

Successful enterprises are built on strong relationships with clients and partners, the culmination of trust which has often been painstakingly developed over time. How we communicate, regardless of the medium we choose to use, determines the level of connection we are able to achieve, and this is an area where the shift from voice to type, has the potential to see us come undone.

Research shows that about 10% of the way in which one person interprets what another person is saying is based on how that person

receives verbal communication, our words. That means that

90% of what we intend to say is completely absent when we send an email, text or instant message.

This is fine when sharing concise, specific information but limiting once we want to say anything more complex, let alone lay the foundations for a lasting relationship.

These findings emphasise the importance of getting out and speaking to our contacts in person, a behaviour which perhaps does not come as naturally to those too young to recall British Telecom's advertising slogan in the 90's "It's good to talk". Communication is behavioural, but employees will only model actions they see their leaders putting into practice. Taking the time to explain best practice in communication as well as regular encouragement can help foster cultural change.

Once we know what we are doing, we can finetune what we say, when we say and even how we say it. But none of that matters if we do not anticipate how our message will be received.

Know your audience

Think about the number of emails you receive every day, the number of conversations you have, the news stories you hear about on the radio

or on TV or read about online, the show you are watching on Netflix. It is difficult to measure exactly how many pieces of information we have to absorb each day; but knowing our audience means considering the impact of what we say from their perspective. In this instance, I mean specifically in the context of the amount of clutter they have to sort through. It is difficult to measure the emails, conversations and news stories but one thing we can use as a gauge is advertising (another realm that competes for our attention) and that in itself paints quite the picture.

struggle to cope. In fact, research conducted by Mediaworks on this topic shows that this information overload is having an impact on our attention spans, with a decrease from 12 to 8 seconds being seen over the past decade. 10 years of technological advancement has undone what could have potentially been centuries of human evolution.

As a result, our brains do what they do best and adapt or in this case take shortcuts. In order to sort through the volume of messages and quickly filter out the clutter, they make decisions for us – in milliseconds – effectively based on whether they like or dislike

or prospect and you have something important to say, make it about them, not you. Do not tell them what you want to say, think about what they are going to want to hear. Practice what you are going to say and hear it from their perspective. Better still, get a colleague to role play the conversation with you.

There is no sign of stopping

What is clear to me is that we need to continue to treat technology with both curiosity and caution. Trusting technology to take over many of our basic daily tasks such as banking or shopping makes sense. When it comes to how we communicate and socialise with one another, delegating this aspect of ourselves to computers is a bad idea, not because the intentions of machines are sinister but because, as human beings, we will continue to seek meaningful human interaction and connection.



The growth of digital media, in particular social media, along with the proliferation of devices such as smartphones has led to a threefold increase in the number of ads we are exposed to.

Between 2007 and 2017, the average Irish adult went from seeing 120 to 370 ads, per day.

Now layer on top of that your emails, conversations, news stories and TV programmes and you quickly appreciate why our brains might

what they are being told. We all do this and if you are looking for proof, there is a simple experiment you can carry out to measure the impact a first impression makes on you. Assuming you had never heard of the person you are meeting before, on a scale of 1-10 what was your likelihood of doing business with them before you set eyes on them and what was it after you had spoken to them for 1 minute? You can discreetly make a note of this.

Knowing this is only useful if we can do something about it so the next time you are meeting a client, partner



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