



Callum Like I See 'Em Communication Hierarchy

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From: Callum Borchers <editor@mycitizensnews.com>

To: All you Twittering, Facebooking fanatics who think social networking Web sites are the coolest way to communicate

Cc:

Bcc:

Subject: They're not

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We need to talk ... or e-mail. That's fine too. But this is much too important for a Facebook wall post, and I'm afraid these first three sentences have already obliterated Twitter's 140-character limit.

It seems some of you (mainly the 35-and-older contingent) have over-extended the bounds of what you believe to be boundless social networking Web sites. You're under the impression that these are the tools kids these days use to communicate, that you'd better hop on the tech train or risk falling behind the times.

Listen, there is such a thing as trying *too* hard, and I'm sorry to report many are guilty of that offense. You're misusing social networking sites, overusing them, or both. It's not entirely your fault though. Likely, no one ever explained to you the unwritten rules of contemporary communication.

To help relieve you of this ignorance, I consulted two of my youngest correspondents: Kim Wilson and Kyle Brennan. She, he and I represent the high-school-student, college-student, and recent-graduate demographics, respectively. Our starting point was an e-mail from CN's assistant publisher to a handful of tech-savvy employees asking our thoughts about a Wall Street Journal article, entitled "Why E-mail No Longer Rules." Ironic, huh?

The report didn't exactly proclaim the death of e-mail but highlighted a growing perception that it is a sort of technological geezer, cumbersome and quickly becoming antiquated by status updates and tweets.

That perception is a misconception. What you have to understand is the communications that show up on Facebook or Twitter are not items that used to be shared via e-mail (or other, primitive forms of correspondence)—they're things that didn't used to be shared at all. Social networking tools are not horning in on e-mail's market so much as they're creating a new market altogether, a market for gems like "John Smith do not walk your dog in sweatpants with no undies on, it will not work out in your favor." That's an actual Facebook status—with the name changed, of course—I saw this week.

"In cases where e-mail has been left behind for the newer, trendier forms of communication, such as Facebook or Twitter, it is often inappropriate to do so," Kim explains.

Basically, there's a hierarchy of communication which, ranked from most to least personal/formal, looks something like this:

1. In-person
2. Phone
3. Letter
4. E-mail
5. Text
6. Facebook
 - a. Message
 - b. Wall post
 - c. Status update
7. Twitter

Consider these real-life examples: If you're going to break up with your girlfriend, you do it in person. If you want to wish your mom a happy birthday, you pick up the phone. If you have an opinion to share with your congressman, you write a letter. If you're conducting business, you type an e-mail. If you're going to be home late from work, you send a text. If you have gossip to share with one friend but not the others, you send a Facebook message, which is private. If you have a clever remark that you'd like the world to see, you post it on your friend's wall, which is public. If you're pumped for Monday Night Football, you update your status. And if you feel compelled to share useless information that no one really cares about, you tweet.

Breaking these unwritten rules is very uncool.

soccermom68: grandma died funeral's tuesday @ 11, dave you wanna do the eulogy?

Like I said—very uncool.

OK, I haven't seen a technological faux pas quite that bad, but the lesson is this: Let the info's level of formality dictate the level of communication.

Last spring, our local politicians went through a Facebook phase, which I chronicled in a Jan. 23 article. Then-Mayor Mike Bronko used a Facebook group to solicit signatures for his primary petition. Kevin Knowles' status reported his nomination by the Democratic Town Committee before any media outlet. These were creative, appropriate uses of the site. Isn't campaigning about networking, after all?

But when several politicians—not just mayoral hopefuls—started using messages and wall posts, instead of e-mails, to communicate with me, my middle-aged-people-trying-too-hard detector went off. Facebook just didn't seem a formal enough forum for reporter and candidate to discuss politics.

"I don't think that social networking has any chance of replacing e-mail," Kyle says. "My friends always like to tell me that I 'get around' Facebook, so I would consider myself pretty knowledgeable about the dos and don'ts of how to use it, and I never will see Facebook as a business tool.

"E-mail is more useful for business and more formal matters because it resembles paper mail—which has always been used for official business, finances and correspondence. Facebook speaks informality to me, which is no slight to it at all (and I think it helps make social networking more fun), so I don't think formal matters such as interviews and business should be conducted via social networking, unless it is the only way."

Here's a secondary (but also important) lesson: Let the level of communication dictate the level of writing.

A few weeks ago, when it seemed every article in the newspaper focused on the Naugatuck Board of Education's budget crisis, a borough administrator e-mailed me with the noble purpose of sharing several positive storylines: "We don't want to loose site of all of the wonderful things that happen on a daily basis in our schools," read the last line of the e-mail.

Now, I can live with relative disregard for spelling and grammar in communication modes five to seven (even newspaper editors kick aside capitalization when texting). But e-mail is pushing it—especially when you're a school system administrator.

"As you move down the hierarchy, it seems as though generally-accepted rules and standards of grammar and etiquette lessen," Kyle concurs. "For example, in business e-mail and letters, I use completely proper grammar; in texts and on Facebook, I normally will not use capital letters and sometimes a bit looser grammar. There's nothing wrong with that, in my opinion; it just shows that those unwritten rules do exist."

It's possible that this administrator was not, in fact, trying to be casual. Perhaps the acceptably haphazard habits of Facebook simply slipped into the e-mail by accident. Kim admits something similar happened to her when she upgraded her cell phone service to include unlimited texting.

"After texting for a couple of weeks like crazy while enjoying my newfound technological freedom, I realized that I was making some pretty serious spelling errors in my papers for school," she says. "They didn't go uncorrected, but tonight became tonite and such. It was pretty horrifying."

Almost as horrifying as making the local paper question whether you know the differences between lose and loose or sight and site.

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