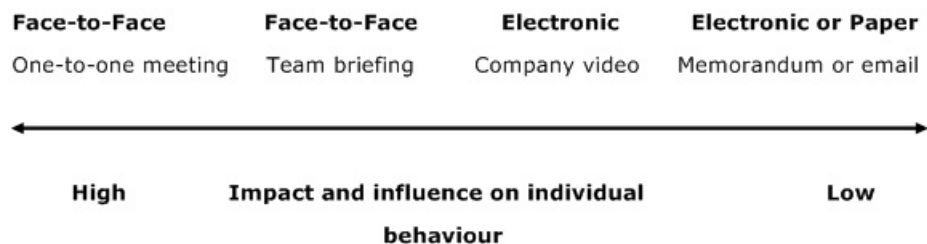# Selecting the Right Communication Channel or Medium

Selection of the right communication channel depends on an understanding of the communication objectives and audiences, and the strengths and weaknesses of the different channels that are available. The correct selection is vital to the success of a communication campaign.

A basic rule of thumb in the selection of the communication channel is that the more a message needs to change behaviours and win over hearts and minds, the more it has to be delivered using a face-to-face channel.

This can be demonstrated in the following continuum:

Face-to-Face	Face-to-Face	Electronic	Electronic or Paper
One-to-one meeting	Team briefing	Company video	Memorandum or email

High ⟵————————————⟶ Low

Impact and influence on individual behaviour

One simple but highly effective method of selecting the right method of communicating with employees is to ask them how they think they should be communicated to about a particular issue.

As an example, one major change programme asked an employee focus group for help in designing the communication campaign regarding the introduction of new roles and jobs. The subsequent campaign was much more effective because it fully met employee needs by answering their concerns in a way that they wanted. Indeed, they developed a totally new communication event that would not have been considered by the communication team on their own! A final advantage was that as part of the communication campaign it was made clear that the process had been designed by employees and this helped employees to more readily accept and hear what were some difficult messages.

The following list of communication channels and media provides a description of their potential strengths and weaknesses. It is partly based on Eileen Scholes's, *Guide to Internal Communication Methods.* [1]

Face-to-face

One-to-one meetings

- Strengths: Personal and can be used to tackle sensitive subjects, ability to check understanding and ask questions, instant feedback.
- Weaknesses: Can be time-hungry and rely on the people skills of both parties; potential difficulties cannot be mediated by a third party.

Team briefing

- Strengths: A face-to-face communication which builds on the team structure of an organisation and provides the opportunity for discussion and clarification. Localises centrally constructed messages.
- Weaknesses: Depends upon the organisation's culture supporting this type of briefing and the quality of the briefer. It is time-consuming (takes time to set up and run a successful briefing session) and relatively costly.

Cascade

- Strengths: As per team briefing but with the added bonus of increasing the understanding between line and senior managers on the challenges and issues ahead. One of the best ways of having an organisational discussion and therefore gaining buy-in to a change programme.
- Weaknesses: Again, as per team briefing, except that the time-scale is even longer and in a large and diverse

organisation a cascade needs two to three months to organise.

Conferences

- Strengths: Attendees are away from the day-to-day pressures of their jobs, almost a face-to-face communication.
- Weaknesses: Requires a great deal of preparation, high cost in terms of cash and lost opportunities, exposes weak presenters and mistakes are very public, not a good channel for the discussion of sensitive subjects.

Presentations and speeches

- Strengths: Can provide personal and direct communication and is a good way to get emotional buy-in.
- Weaknesses: Can be difficult to present complex ideas and rely on the quality of the presenter. In this regard it is also an environment where many people feel uncomfortable.

Print-based material

Circulars and memos

- Strengths: Complex ideas can be presented to everyone and instructions laid out in a clear format.
- Weaknesses: Needs to be well written and does not provide a method which allows readers to question or clarify information.

Magazines and newsletters

- Strengths: Can be read any time and able to reach everyone in the organisation. A familiar layout and flexible format can allow a large amount of information to be conveyed.
- Weaknesses: A slow method of delivery that needs to be planned well in advance. Needs to be good quality to capture and maintain readers' attention.

Manuals and handbooks

- Strengths: These provide a clear set of instructions, can be very informative and form the basis for training and quality procedures.
- Weaknesses: Often perceived as dull and out of date. They need a lot of work to make sure that they are used and maintained.

Brochures and reports

- Strengths: Should be good quality and therefore have an impact. They present complex information with diagrams and photographs. Can be kept as a record.
- Weaknesses: These can be high cost and date quite quickly.

Electronic communication

Audio conferencing

- Strengths: A quick, easy and cost-effective way of linking people from any location without the need for travelling.
- Weaknesses: Relies on the quality of the phone network and needs a good Chair to ensure that everyone gets a chance to contribute. It can take time for people to understand the etiquette required for audio conferencing to be successful.

Video Conferencing

- Strengths: As per audio conferencing but with the added advantage of being able to see one another.
- Weaknesses: Can be quite costly and the equipment needs to be readily available.

Video/DVD

- Strengths: A direct method of communication which can have a big impact on an audience. Good at providing both a big picture view and training demonstrations. Provides a consistent message.
- Weaknesses: It can be difficult to present complex ideas and the audience expects a high quality of production. Takes time to produce and may not have a long shelf-life. Scheduling a viewing time may be difficult.

Business TV

- Strengths: As for video but with added immediacy that programmes can be arranged and broadcast quickly and cheaply. A phone-in facility can also add a degree of feedback and questioning.
- Weaknesses: The initial investment is large and ultimately you don't always know that the audience are watching. If a local manager does not view it as important then it may never be watched.

Computer-based communication

Email

- Strengths: A quick, easy and immediate method of communication to everyone in the organisation. Avoids paper mountains but creates a record of correspondence. Documents can quickly be shared.
- Weaknesses: There is a temptation for users to send too much information to everyone they think may want to receive it. This can lead to a user being swamped. There is also a possibility that key messages may not be read timeously.

Intranet

- Strengths: People will look for information that they need and are therefore more inclined to read it. This means that they have to take responsibility for themselves and can help create an empowered culture. It is immediate and easy to update or amend. It can provide a front end to an organisational knowledge management system.
- Weaknesses: It can be over designed with excessive use of graphics and if users cannot find what they are looking for quickly and easily they will soon give up.

Corporate portals

- Strengths: Can be personalised to ensure that paths can be created through an overwhelming amount of information. Further, the created paths will be highly useful to the individual user, ensuring that the portal retains hold over the user, and becomes a trusted communication path.
- Weaknesses: May themselves become too broad if a certain degree of corporate control is not exercised over the basic format of the content. May distract the user from specifically work-related tasks by offering e-commerce links and real time news bulletins of questionable relevance.

Web casting

- Strengths: Allows users to view video broadcasts on their PCs when it suits them. A cheap and flexible method of video distribution.
- Weaknesses: To implement, requires a high quality and expensive technology infrastructure, otherwise the quality of the video can be very poor.

Interactive virtual meetings and classrooms

- Strengths: An immediate and effective method of communicating on a personal and interactive basis with a diverse network of people.
- Weaknesses: The initial technology cost and overcoming users' potential technology fear are the main weakness for this form of communication.

Instant messaging

- Strengths: The most immediate communication method short of conferencing applications. Can be used in conjunction with these to create simultaneous strands of dialogue. Avoids the 'turn off' potential of a deleted or ignored email.
- Weaknesses: The efficient use of the system depends upon the observance of messaging manners, and the heeding of instructions such as 'do not disturb' from a potential message recipient. Lends itself to informality to an even greater extent than email, and could be damaging to corporate reputation if accessed by an external party.

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[1] Eileen Scholes, *Guide to Internal Communication Methods* (Gower, 1999).

Related Items

Related Resources

- Eileen Scholes: Communication Channels
- Mapping Communication Channels
- The Medium is the Message
- Planning an Internal Communication Campaign