

“WHAT ARE YOU SAYING THAT YOU DIDN'T SAY”:

A guide to the business messages that you don't know you are sending
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This is a summary of all the information that we've gathered over the years about the various ways of sending messages to your contacts, who may be customers or contacts or suppliers. There are the obvious ones like having a website or a brochure but there are less obvious ones like making it easy for your customers to deal with you. It may not seem much but in a tight situation it might make the difference and most of the things mentioned here are more about presentation than spending serious money.

The unconscious messages that we all transmit are not just about body language or tone of voice because they come through in every single channel of communication. Each channel has its own characteristics and advantages and every body is different in the receptivity to each message.

The purpose of this exercise was originally to get people in business who wanted to communicate more effectively with their potential customers to see how communicating was not just about advertising or whizzy websites but about every single point of contact between their existing and potential customers and them selves. The other big positive is that being more effective is very often low or no cost and so many other companies are so awful at it that anybody who is even slightly less awful stands out like a beacon of hope.

However it may be useful to look at the most common business manifestations of these unconscious messages and see where the most obvious pitfalls lurk, because there are plenty. You don't have to change any thing you do as a result but it might be interesting to experiment with some of the ideas. If you do- good luck, if you don't, I hope it means that you've already got it right.

The commonest means of communicating with customers:

- | | |
|----------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Telephone | 8. Exhibitions |
| 2. Email | 9. Personal visit |
| 3. Letter | 10. Catalogues |
| 4. Brochure | 11. Invoices/ Statements/ Payments |
| 5. Journals | 12. Text messages |
| 6. Website | 13. Business cards |
| 7. Advertising | 14. Social Media |

There are surely some others but that sort of message is pretty unmistakable. The above represent most of the channels through which business communications are conducted (you may already be saying how is a business card a communication- we'll get onto that) and they all have their own special characteristics. The most interesting aspect is that they are all open to misinterpretation, some in a small way and some catastrophically. They all offer the opportunity to differentiate one business from another as well so they are all sources of potential advantage.

Channels

The most potent conversations are those where most channels are open. Channels are the means of communication and they can work together or separately. They can also be contradictory which is usually a bad thing.

For example, if you went to see somebody face to face you would have the choice of seven channels:

- Words
- Voice- inflexion and tone
- Expression- facial
- Expression- body language
- Dress- suit etc
- Accessories
- Dialogue

Whereas if you wrote to somebody you would have the choice of one perhaps two channels:

Words- what you said

Accessories- how you presented your message and in what medium.

There are benefits and disadvantages in both of these media. For example if you are giving so many signals about who you are and what you are about it is very easy for any body to understand what your requirements are. Equally if you are sending mixed signals it mainly results in people feeling uneasy and that in turn makes them less willing to take risks e.g. give a potential new supplier a contract.

One of the reasons why the telephone remains the very best medium for practical jokes is that it is almost single channel but it demands an instant

response giving the respondent very little time to consider their response. It's very easy to add one absurdity to another until the situation is completely out of control. Come to think of it that sounds like quite a few offices I know. Not sure how the popularity of camera phones is going to affect this handy little phenomenon but it may only mean that the joker has to be a little more sophisticated.

The Telephone

So let's begin at the beginning with the humble telephone.

What are you saying when you don't answer the phone with your name

- a) you've forgotten it (your name, not the phone)
- b) you are paranoid
- c) you are so important that everybody knows who you are (They don't)
- d) you are working for an organisation that provokes such hatred that you dare not reveal it(there really are some)
- e) you provoke such hatred etc
- f) you are working for an organisation with ridiculous rules.

And yes, there are a very few situations where you would not reveal your name- perverts, etc but by and large how about saying who you are briefly and clearly? Never never do the humiliating company spiel about Boggs and Co, makers of the finest..... It makes the company look like bullies and it wastes everybody's time. While we are on the subject try not to say how can I help you- there must be better ways of getting the conversation started.

How about saying your name, clearly and distinctly possibly your department if you are big enough to have such things and then leaving it at that. Then your caller, having called with the intention in almost all cases of conducting a dialogue, gets to say something too. Then you can both be businesslike and having established that you are the correct person get down to the real business of the call.

What is the real business of the call? Well, it's about exchanging pleasantries. WHAT?

Yup. It's about treating your brand new friend like a human being. Not a unit of consumption, not an electronic cash cow but a human being who may want to conduct a transaction with you.

And now the really scary bit. Your brand new friend may (no guarantees, mind) might just get infected by the spirit of the thing and treat you just the same.

And now the even scarier bit- this is what really successful sales people do.

So now you are lifelong friends, how about conducting some business. You need to know what he or she wants or you may be there all day. Ok, but you may need the loo at some time.

You can try asking but the most important skill by several light years is **listening**. Listening carefully, intently and with purpose. What wonderful messages this sends.

- I'm interested
- This is important to me
- I will respond correctly
- I will have understood my customers needs.

All this time you may not have said more than a couple of words to confirm your understanding.

There is some good and bad news in this little nugget of truth. It is a learned skill. Although some people are naturals there are many who have learned and keep practising this crucial skill. It's vital in other areas as well but here there is nothing more important.

So you are there and you have sent all the right messages by saying who you are(business like) and listening carefully to your caller. At this stage if you really must you can say Can I help you? However it would be much better if you found a turn of phrase which is original and personal that gets the conversation going. Then you are off and running. But you must remember to be purposeful (no rambling, drifting into anecdotage or what my geography teacher used to call digressions)

Then having finished the conversation if it's appropriate you can tell your new friend" We'd really like to do business with you". And maybe leave it at that. Or you could say" We'd really like to do business with you, have you got any idea how we could get started?" This may not help you if you have been working with them for the last twenty years but even with those people it always worth opening up the dialogue because

- a) you never know and
- b) it shows that you are on the case.

Most people (99%) won't mind your being businesslike with them, many will appreciate it along with behaving like a human being not an invading alien. If they do suggest ways in which you could do some more business or start some up you must follow it up, people don't like having their advice ignored.

While we are on the subject- hands up everybody who has not at one time or another wanted to kill an automated answering system. Hands down. You can't see but I'll bet there's a forest of arms waving out there. Well for those with Zen like patience, a calm temperament and possibly a lobotomy, you probably haven't. For the rest of us boring ordinary mortals, you bet!

These products save the company money, absolutely true. But whose company? Have you noticed that only the really big companies who can afford not to give a damn what the customer thinks or wants use them extensively? It sends a string of truly awful messages. " We don't care about you, your horrid little business, your tedious problems or your failure so long as we get to rip as much money as possible out of it."

Then just to ensure that the message about not giving a damn about your business has been rammed home the system that is meant to save money etc crashes. So you couldn't even be bothered to get that detail right.

Now there are a few, a very few(nobody gets off the hook that easily) automated systems which are genuinely hands off and have some benefits – the DVLA system for example is surprisingly easy to use. But even then, if you are competing for business, a huge opportunity to start a dialogue with the customer has just been lost. Yes, you can do this when and if the caller gets to his destination but you've just lost another selling opportunity.

But that's fine because you are so swamped with new business that you don't need any more. At the very least if you must use one of these products you need to do the following

- a) Get one that is rock solid reliable and gives the customer other options for contacting you- maybe call forwarding or an alternative contact.
- b) Get a properly audible reception message. Not one that was last recorded down a mine on a cylinder which identifies you and the company with if it's very brief a promotional phrase about the your company.
- c) Monitor it constantly, don't send the message which says we don't mind leaving you high and dry.

Lastly, what are you saying when you answer the phone whilst driving/ eating/playing golf etc? Try to ensure that you can pay proper attention- even hands free is not really suitable for more than the most cursory conversation. Partial attention mostly produces partial performance.

e-Mail

So what's next- the ubiquitous e mail. So much potential for disaster or glory it's frightening because it's:

- 1) only one channel- words plus a bit of appearance
1+1/2 a bit of dialogue, depending on the speed of your connection

The difficulty is that words thought then written are very often written then thought about. Apart from the splendid examples of indiscretions more appalling than the photocopied posterior there are:

- Spelling mistakes- no excuse even with spell-check putting them in- get a dictionary if need be.
- Grammar- ditto- especially when the machine can do it for you.
- No return address- the unspoken message being I don't really care about making your life easier
- Failing to refer to any previous correspondence thus ensuring a bit more work for your customer
- Jargon and abbreviations- only when you are SURE your correspondent will understand them otherwise you are just being thoughtless.
- E Mail Incontinence- sending copies to your dog, the caretaker, Lloyd George etc. This suggests you may not really know what you are doing so you'd better copy everybody so you can say " but I told you" when your scheme goes pear shaped. .
- Being over familiar- if I've never met you I'm not your mate, friend, colleague, co conspirator or sidekick. Even if I have I may not be- so don't be smarmy and pretend that I am.
- No subject- do you really want your email to be deleted unread?

Letters

Letters- the opportunity to do something really well in a measured way, should you decide to do so. A well written letter, always assuming that it gets there, can be worth a dozen badly thought out but speedy e mails. Letters can give you the look of a measured capable person who knows what they are doing. But letters can have their own pitfalls as well. The messages that you send here are ones that you will recognise from other people and companies but it is always surprising how many organisations get them wrong.

Give some thought as to how many channels are open. Not many so you'd better get the message clear and unambiguous. Unless of course you want to be ambiguous which a letter allows because you have no means of immediately

questioning the writer. A letter also allows a big plan or idea to be set out without interruption so if it is concise and timely it can have a disproportionate impact.

- a) Get the details right- addresses, titles, dates etc. Don't look careless.
- b) Get the usual formalities right like Dear Sir goes with yours faithfully and yours sincerely goes with addressing a letter to a person. Some people want you to use their title.
- c) Don't forget that not all letters go to English speakers. Their formats may be different.
- d) If it's unimportant use grubby stationery. But if it's that unimportant why do it anyway. Don't devalue your work.
- e) If you decide to have whizzy stationery remember that it has to do a job of work. Stationery that is too elaborate risks being the only thing that is remembered about the company so keep it simple. You risk sending the message that it's a bit of a marginal or fashionable thing that you are doing. This is excellent- so long as that is what you are doing. If not, not. By the by, elaborate stationery is mostly very expensive- once again great if you want to send that message but if not, not. However good paper always seems to send a positive message- nothing too flash- it does not have to be hand rolled on the thighs of strapping maidens at the full moon, Unless you invite me to the factory, that is.
- f) Whilst we're on the subject of too elaborate try to keep your company name simple- either something abstract that you can create the meaning for or something that helps you know what it does on the tin. Otherwise it all starts to look like an in joke that you don't want to let people in on- a very unhelpful message and yet again, you didn't even say it. Unfortunately what you wanted was the exact reverse- you want everybody to know exactly what you are up to and how brilliant it is and how everybody feels very good about dealing with you. The only exception for this is the legendary reverse price curve where the more you put the price up the more you sell. Think Ferraris, jewellery etc. Then you might want to be so exclusive that not many people know about you. Unless you've managed to achieve that fabulous state then tell 'em and tell 'em again.
- g) Signatures - generally this works so that unless your signature is genuinely artistic ensure that it is legible and in the right place and leave it. Make sure that critical stuff like first name contact is repeated if need be. Although if it is genuinely artistic and people like it then use it- it is nice to see elegant things and it can be a good differentiator and another message. It does help to sign a document- very old fashioned certainly but in these transitory days some old looking things may help send some very helpful messages about probity etc. But don't lay it on with a trowel. Remember that "patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel" (Samuel Johnson)

- h) How do you sign your name, no, not with a pen but how do or should you style yourself- ask how are you known in the organisation? After all the recipient wants to know that you authored it. There is one very unfortunate message which emanates mostly from government departments where they don't sign the letter or they do and it's illegible and there is no clear contact. It's that you don't want to speak to the great unwashed public although you spend a great deal of time saying that you do. It just makes you look dishonest and you haven't even started the conversation yet. I know that you risk the odd lunatic but it looks bad when you seem to be hiding from your customers- are you really that hopeless?
- i) If the letter is not from you then what should you say? Saying the customer service team always seems like you don't want any body to take anything personally (if I had a complaint about bad service I would want somebody- not a team- to take it very personally indeed) Equally you cannot give one name to handle thousands of enquiries. One way of doing this is to specify one name and then answer on their behalf .
- j) Format- adopt the most conventional modern one with which you are comfortable. Don't forget to use grammar and spell check because if it's wrong it does detract from the impact of your carefully crafted document. Do not trust spellcheck either- if it's really important then you really should look it up- especially if there is a print run involved. There are plenty of standard templates but make sure that you do not adopt an American format in error. Try to be more thoro.

While we're on the subject- Bid Writing

Bid writing is one of the chores of the 21st century. It requires patience and some times specialist knowledge which may be so specialised that you have to buy it in.

Key features are:

- 1) Answer the question- to not do so risks having a good bid thrown out because it's a box ticking exercise. Not answering may suggest that you are not taking care.
- 2) Have standard policies already available, Health and Safety, Governance etc
- 3) Get help- government departments are obliged to help with questions- the bad news is that they may also relay your answer to the other bidders so be careful what you ask.
- 4) Make sure the bid is clearly laid out and indexed- this is to help you as much as the client but if the bid recipient has to wade through a badly laid out bid that sends messages about the care you'll take with the contract.

- 5) Bids are a beauty contest, you must also do something that differentiates you from the opposition – in a positive way. It could be after care or writing case studies, just something that shows how aware you are

Brochures

You might ask what can you do in a brochure which sends messages of which you were not aware. You might also ask why have a brochure at all. However you need to ask how clients find you- brochures are one of a battery of methods which you can use. Fortunately there are not that many because a lot of what goes in there is factual and does not lend itself to misinterpretation. But there are a few areas which can always be improved. The key message here has to be “make it easy”. The reverse of that message is “we can’t be bothered to make it easy for you, the customer”. We think the customer should have to work to place an order otherwise how will he feel a true sense of fulfilment and achievement. The Americans led the field in complicated catalogues at one time. The joy of twenty four digit part numbers where one error was disaster and each part was listed on two widely separated pages but the parts had mutually critical dimensions. The other big issue for brochures at the moment is- why?

The spread of online brochures and catalogues plus the print costs of conventional publications has led many companies to abandon print. This is looked at elsewhere but there are some messages that brochures send that don’t help.

Clutter- too much, too cramped, too busy. Most companies make their real money out of one or two products, why not concentrate on those? Amateurish- if you can’t do it well, find some other way rather than letting it look like your child’s kindergarten project. Unless the brochure is intended to give enough data for the customer to be able to order without talking to a sales person then a brochure just opens the transaction because you’ll need to speak to somebody. It has substantial virtues in that it sets out in writing exactly what is on offer and your terms of business but you need to ensure that the offer is clear also. If the customer does need to then you must make it easy to get in touch. Why- because if you make it difficult (obscurely positioned phone numbers in small type, having to turn the page to look it up) no address (you’d be amazed how many people still want to buy locally) no contact name, all of these send messages that you don’t really want to send.

Journals

You’re probably thinking by now what negative unintended messages can you send in a journal or magazine, especially when it’s you that has written the press release. Here there is a distinction between press releases and advertising because you have almost absolute control over advertising but not over press

releases. It's mostly about being open. There is a whole new area of expertise about press releases which I won't even attempt to cover but again it is something that you can learn to do better than most of your competitors. Journals can offer a way of discussing a product and offering a sound case for your product whilst accepting that other products have their place.

Press Releases

You may want to send out press releases about your new product or service. If you want them to be effective you must target them to an industry and better still to a journalist that you know understands your industry. This may be costly and you must remember that journalists get very touchy about you expecting them to write something favourable (or anything at all) about your product or service. You must, if you want them to succeed make them interesting for the reader- the best press releases are the ones that don't require any effort from the journalist. Also if you get some serious interest (good or bad) be prepared- don't pass the call around to anybody that's in, there should be a plan about who gets the call and what they say before the first call comes in otherwise all the time spent in creating the press release is wasted and you may end up with negative publicity

Websites

You can say so much with websites both intentionally and unintentionally. But they are more demanding than you think. Based on various studies and information from other media it sounds like you have about four seconds to make your mark when someone clicks through to your site. Try it- it's a very short time to create an impression. How long do you think they will linger? Probably about 20 seconds. So you have a few seconds to get people engaged with your site and 20 seconds before our visitor either clicks on or starts looking properly.

What's the lesson here? That websites are not a cheap way of not reprinting your brochure (although they can be) and that they have a discipline all of their own. It is very easy to have a truly awful website and you only have to look at a few to find some real horrors. More of that later.

It is pretty much a single channel but remember that your website can be interactive and ultimately you could have a fully developed website that takes orders for you and better still does your selling. Or does it?

You need to be very careful with websites that actually sell. The website is to all intents and purposes you, or at least your company. So any experience, good or bad, reflects on you. Not only does this mean that the site has to offer a complete picture of what you offer but also a website can be only a single dialogue so you have virtually no chance to put things right if it is not. If it does not offer a complete picture then you must offer the option of communicating with and preferably talking to a real person. So it has to be good otherwise it makes you

look bad. Just imagine having an ambassador who doesn't know which country he represents.

A website is not really an online paper brochure. It has its forms and requirements apart from the obvious ones of clarity and purpose. To avoid sending the message that you haven't understood the new medium either get the pros in, or keep it simple, preferably both. The two key things to remember are That a screen is an even smaller working area than a typical page and secondly that you have no control over delivery, that is, you have to design the content to work on the worst screens.

This may mean no whizzy flash, no chunks of text, being careful with colour(making sure you maintain contrast) and keeping it straightforward. So what does the bad website look like- how can you tell, it's almost impossible to read! That's the first thing.

- It's obsolete- it looks old
- It's difficult to navigate
- It's slow to use
- It's forgettable
- There are no links
- There are links- but they are broken.
- It's irrelevant- unimportant detail
- It's missing important detail.

If you're feeling brave you can try the Dr John Beeston scoring system for websites. John has devised a very simple but very telling appraisal system for website quality. It goes like this:

If your website has contact details including names and addresses on the opening page score three points.

If your website has references from customers on the front page score two points

If your website has active useful links score two points

If your website has a clear and unambiguous statement of what is on offer score three points.

Now go and score your own site. Some website designers score less than four points! This is a useful point- is it because as a designer they are so busy designing it they forget to make it usable. The reason for these points are simple and it's still about sending messages. You must make it easy to contact you, and that method must have some options (not everybody has e mail) and it must be responded to.

References from customers- if it's a new customer references can only help. Not too fulsome but meeting the customers concerns-(good!) they don't know you from a hole in the ground so some reference may help unless it is wholly irrelevant to the customers concerns or business in which case it may at worst be

neutral. Links- make it plain that you are well connected and you are there to help.

Finally you must say clearly what the business is about. This is more important than ever when you are starting up because nobody knows. This comes back to our old friend, features and benefits. You can send a message which incorporates all sorts of corporate gobbledygook and hopefully you'll have some fun dreaming it up. It is much more powerful to say if you can in one sentence why your customer will benefit from using you, your company or your service. Try to think what you would want in their position- because that sends an extremely positive message, and then say it. Because that says you understand them and their business.

The whole point here is that you are making life for your customer easy, the point of that being that you can so easily send a positive or a negative message and we have to assume that you didn't intend to send a negative message. The risk being that if you don't make it easy they may not come back. Worse, they may tell other people.

Advertising

There has been so much written about advertising that it's difficult to see how more can be said so here are few ideas as to how you can avoid some of the more obvious absurdities. Messages you would have rather not sent.

We don't know what we are doing so we're in the wrong journal saying things that don't mean anything to our customers. We are going to try to cram in as much as we possibly can into our ad to really make you, the customer, work and when you start doing business with us it will be just as bad.

"We are a small outfit in a provincial town working with local companies but we'd like to look corporate so we are going to do some designers dream that doesn't tell you about the product in any way. Our designer is completely out of touch with reality but you probably worked that one out already and we're not going to fix it."

Of course advertising is much more than journals. It can be posters, television, newspapers, vehicle naming, in fact anything that is part of your public face. Generally television is too expensive for most start-ups but there are infomercials in the USA that do seem less extortionate. But for our purposes unless you've got a major domestic product you will be talking to people who don't really want to know. Unless you have a massive budget you'll end up talking to shiftworkers, students and the unemployed. Not a problem if that is your target audience.

The message that you risk sending is that you don't understand your customers. Also you may not be able to afford the budget to get your message across so you lose both ways as you lose money and you could have spent it better elsewhere.

Posters can be cheap enough to be practical but you must be sure you are talking to the right audience and remember that you have only a very brief period to get your message across and it's no use talking to people who don't want your product no matter how hard you promote it. You need to control the poster campaign very carefully and it seems that posters as a promotional tool do come and go as a fashion.

Newspapers can be useful because you can specify the areas in which you want the ad to appear. So if you have something that is essentially local like a garden centre then it can be very effective. But remember first of all find out what your potential customers want and make sure that's what you are saying.

Vehicle naming- just to emphasise that everything helps, or doesn't, to promote your business. It's never too clear whether putting logos on vehicles helps or hinders but it doesn't seem to have done Eddie Stobart much harm and much more interesting- people did comment favourably. It's another positive that makes you look capable. Again it's another message that can work for you or against you with the turnout of the truck and driver. So it's an influence in terms of brand awareness. If you do make sure that it does all the right things in terms of memorability and getting your audience to take notice.

For all of these the usual rules about presentation apply and here is where you can send the wrong messages. Simply missing out the contact details and making it difficult to do business with you is just as bad here as anywhere else but how many people see a vehicle and use the contact details. It seems more like brand awareness but if you can establish what it is you do and associate that clearly with the name or identity of your business you won't have done too badly.

Exhibitions

Exhibitions have always been a bit of a minefield because you have so little control over the event. You can do a brilliant job but if nobody turns up then you are stuck with a very boring and expensive few days. But it's a wonderful medium for getting your message across- or not. You have all the channels to communicate with and what is more you can through stand layout and presentation, control the environment. So where do you start sending the messages you didn't plan on. Well.....

Let's start with going to the show because you think you should. Unless you think that not being there will send the wrong message, don't go. It is likely to cost you the price of one salesman for a year so how much business would he or she pull in? Will the show get more?

Then look at the stand layout. Let's make it difficult to find (don't tell your customers that you are there and design it to be obscure)

Then you really need to leave everything to the last minute and ignore the fact that effective stands are manned by trained people- it's a skill. Then don't decide what to promote on the stand until the very last minute.

Then make the catalogue entry so obscure that nobody knows what you do or why?

Then don't have an effective system for logging and following enquiries – after all it's only cost you a few thousand pounds to go there.

Then don't brief your stand people about what you want, who is responsible for what and who is likely to turn up and how they need to be handled

Then, important this, don't appoint a particular person to be responsible for vital things like stand manning and management.

This causes all sorts of amusing chaos and leaves a very definite impression on colleagues and customers. It's better still if you don't define responsibilities or let people know, that way every body can see you don't know what you are doing.

The only better way of damaging your companies reputation is to give the job to somebody who is too busy to do it properly, then both you and they can have a breakdown together.

Another issue is whether you contract out the stand design or whether you do it yourself. The trick here is to select the supplier carefully then meddle as much as you have time for. Better still meddle a bit more so that you can make a mess of your own job as well as theirs. Then if you can try some last minute changes coupled with a muddled brief and specification in the first place you can get the designer to share your breakdown.

Then get all your stand staff to line the perimeter of the stand with their arms folded in their best “stand by to repel borders” poses.

This works better if they all look a bit dishevelled or better still if they are eating. The value of this is enhanced by evidence of the previous meal distributed round the stand. Empty coffee cups work well in this respect as well.

It's always a good wheeze to get your staff out drinking till the early hours then they can be utterly useless for most of the morning and give the worst possible impression to any potential customers. This does not discount the odd late night session if that's the only way to entertain customers but make sure somebody is in good order for the following day. Ditto the odd bonding session or alcohol fuelled exchange of views.

Another stunt that always gets good results is getting your friends or chums to design the stand- you can spend the saving on designers fees with a psychiatrist.

One last thing- if you take the cost of the show and divide that by the number of enquiries that is what each one has cost you. So perhaps you ought to follow them up.

All this adds up to sending a message that suggests competence or not and it's quite easy to go either way.

Personal Visit

If used properly it's the most effective way of selling, and vice versa. It is also expensive and demanding .The main problem is that you have all seven channels working. Words, tone, facial expression, content, body language, dress, accessories and dialogue are all at play.

Words are obvious- are you being positive but clear. If you are trying to create understanding why are you using words that nobody understands, for example not explaining acronyms. Another aspect that makes your voice attractive is speaking clearly. Of course you speak clearly. Don't you. Of course you do.

Try the experiment, if you are feeling brave, of listening to your own voice and how expressive it is. You may not enjoy the experience, but it will be very useful. Tone is also important- hard to define but you know people whose tone is one that encourages conversation. It needs to be even, but with some highs and lows to add colour. It needs to be clear, don't drawl or fail to finish words. You can use tone and expression together to invite an answer – it does not have to be prompted by a question.

Facial expression is obvious – you need to smile- not so much that you look a fool but you'd be amazing how it encourages dialogue. Content- be businesslike but friendly. Don't be terse but don't babble. You'll know you are babbling when there are no gaps between words. Whilst we are on the subject, I know you are told to personalise conversations by using the respondents first name. However this does not mean every third word.

Body language- there's been a lot written about body language. Perhaps the key issue is that people believe your body language rather than what you are saying. The worst aspect of this is that if you say one thing and your body says another then it just looks as if you are lying. What is more people tend to believe your body language before they believe your words. Quite right, most of the time. Dress- a bit of a minefield as you need to seem as if you speak your customers language which means you need to look similar.

However if you mostly visit geeks whose dress code is grubby trainers and combat trousers you need to get your own look. Which is easy if it's slightly more formal than your customer. Bit difficult if it's a funeral director but you get the

idea. You can try to be distinctive but you need to make sure that every thing else is right before you become too different.

There are a few very obvious aspects to dress such as being practical such as not wearing short skirts if you are going to be walking round a big factory, especially one with aerial walkways. Unless you are very self confident, that is.

Accessories are things like laptops. Just remember that they are there to make the process of getting business easier. Don't use a laptop to demonstrate your product unless you are 100% certain that it adds to your efforts. Fourteen engineers crammed round an indistinct screen listening to a poor translation from the native Swedish or whatever is unlikely to help unless you are peddling the secret of eternal life. The message that you'll send here is that you don't know how to send a message.

Accessories can also mean clothing or tools. It's a great way of promoting your company and also importantly giving your workforce a sense of identity. But if the clothing is impractical or poorly maintained it can start to send the opposite message. The same goes for safety gear- the people that turn up obviously kitted out for the job with obviously maintained kit (doesn't have to be new) That goes for boots and shoes, headgear and items like gloves too.

Last but not least we come to A CAPITAL CRIME known as death by Powerpoint. You are almost certainly wise enough to have worked this out for yourself but just to remind you. Firstly it is a single channel medium mediated by a presenter. However people watch people not presentations so make sure that you've got your presentation sorted out for you to do the selling aided by the presentation. Perhaps if it's a highly technical presentation then you don't need to be there. So why are you? Why not put it on the web and offer a helpline instead?

If you must use Power point then there are a couple of things which bear repeating. Firstly don't load up the presentation, keep the number of slides to a minimum. Secondly keep the dissolves, flash, zooms and other whizzy bits to a minimum, if for no other reason than too many tricks lose impact. Thirdly, presenting things well is an act if the venue is any size so you need to be a little larger than life. Finally, keep it simple, it shows you understand your product if you can provide a concise summary of what its about.

Also do yourself a favour and rehearse with the equipment you are going to use for real. It's a real shame when a good presentation is tainted by several minutes fumbling trying to get unreliable technology to behave. These days it is worse than ever with more variation in equipment and content so only use what works

Dialogue- the most important thing about dialogue is that it is a dialogue, not a download. Do not talk at people and do listen. It helps enormously if you are really interested in people but it's a skill which can be practised.

Invoices/Statements/ Payments

What now, you'll be saying. This is only about the ease of doing business with you. Even the humble invoice plays its part in creating a positive climate for your business. Better still it does get noticed so if you do it well it's a brilliant business differentiator. All the transactions that you do send a message and it's as easy to do it well as badly. There are other stunts that can help like using coloured paper to make it easy to identify your paperwork and codes that can be easily identified. Having said that most invoice formats and layouts are determined by the supplier of your software and that is going to be a standard template. The only way that you can optimise your software is to change your supplier and that may be harder than you think.

You can always try the ultimate test which is to be your own customer to see what the experience is like- it may be appalling but it's information you need to know. Clear formats can also help if you get into disputes, only because it's easy to identify your paperwork which is another reason to make it easy to read. Also it may help you conform to any legislation concerning disability and access.

One other aspect of the paperwork that you produce is proposals- also see above- Bids.

They are one of the best opportunities to show your business in the best possible light. A clear unequivocal proposal (or one that identifies the areas of uncertainty clearly) saves so much time and temper that it is even more amazing that people don't invest a little bit more time in it. This does not mean getting some software package to reel off pages of text or irrelevant diagrams.

The unconscious message that you send is about how easy it will be to deal with you. It may be that your product or service will be excellent without but do you really want to put a barrier between you and the customer?

Text Messages

Text messages are cheap, quick, and personal. They are the medium of choice for schoolchildren everywhere. They have their own runes and rules

This is the 21st century version of door to door selling since it is personal, the customer has to be listening and doesn't know who is contacting them, generally. Unlike door to door selling though it is extremely cheap and it can access some groups such as teenagers who are almost invisible to other media.

It doesn't have the weight of most other communications and you have to assume that your audience also have phones. It's also very easy to delete any message without reading it. Equally it's immediate, it can be very timely and it is potentially very personal. Some people regard text messages as personal and regard advertising as extremely intrusive. You may find that the target group that you wish to address do not use text messages as a form of communication.

Business Cards

Firstly ask yourself what these are for? They should say who you are and what you do and how to contact you as clearly as possible.

You might want shaped cards, CD disk shaped cards, coloured cards, shiny cards, talking cards (not too far off), folding cards, big cards, embossed cards, cards with logos, cards with uplifting slogans, cards printed in two languages, cards made of plastic etc etc

1. Does it do the basic things- without needing a CD player or the eyesight of a young eagle?
2. Does it complement the activity of your company? How would a multi colour contemporary looking card work for a solicitor? Does this sound like a mixed message? Are you suggesting you don't really know how to present your company? Could be.
3. Does it fit into a Rolodex- yes people still like them and use them! so don't make your customer work by having to get your card to fit- unless that differentiates your business in a positive way. Worse, your card may get thrown away.

If you are really confident then go for something original- after all if it gets you noticed beyond just being a record of what you are and how to contact you then it's a bonus. Equally if it's dissonant- you get conflicting messages, then it's worse than useless. Confusing messages could be very expensive products with very cheap cards.

You should be original if possible because that makes you memorable, if you can't be then be accurate and tasteful- it gives a sense of gravity which helps for most small companies.

Social Media

Here's the next big minefield to negotiate and it's especially hard because of the blurring between work and domestic. The most obvious danger here has already been shown with employees being cautioned or in some cases sacked for posting pictures of themselves behaving inappropriately. In many cases it was

being as inappropriate as a newt but that is not the issue. In an era when everybody is their colleagues keeper it can be high risk.

Bear in mind one critical axiom from Oscar Wilde (if not it should have been)

“It is better to keep quiet and be thought a fool than to speak up and remove all doubt”

So for Facebook, Twitter, Myspace etc only post those details that you would be willing to hand over to your most prudish customer unless you are quite happy about your aliases. Remember that these records may never be deleted so it will not be just for the next few days- it could be forever.

Social Notworking

Linked in, E-cademy, Plaxo and the rest. There is no doubt that these can be powerful marketing tools but that is not their primary objective so don't presume that others will accept your treating them as such. There is one such site where their “personal” communications showed not the slightest interest in the person or whether they might have any value beyond being a consumer,. That's bordering on insulting.

Why social notworking – because unless you are involved in some entirely media driven activity then this is not mainstream activity for you because to do it well takes time. It's another tool just like a website and if it requires several hours per day to sustain it then it is not practical for a small business. Equally sites like Twitter can be very time consuming and offer no more than domestic details.

By the way- rants almost never affect the person or organisation to whom the rant is directed. They can be very effective in making you look petty or irrational. Equally if you can appear reasonable and logical in the face of extreme behaviour it does enhance your status.

But do not underestimate the power of social media. They can be very effective but they take time to learn and skill to operate effectively.

That's it. I hope it was useful. Some comments were based upon experience and others on received wisdom but all of them might just help you get what you want more easily- that must be good.

Thanks for your time!