

Business Writing Tips and Advice



Is Communication About To Change?

10 April 2013 by Richard Walker



A couple of weeks ago I received an email from Jeff Patmore, former Head of BT's Global University Research programme. For many years, Jeff managed research collaborations between BT and top universities around the world such as the University of Cambridge, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Tsinghua University in China.

Jeff was also a client of mine. I used to run a major graduate and undergraduate recruitment business called Ragtime. Seven years ago, he and I devised a technology competition to attract bright undergraduates to work for BT Research. In co-operation with Jeff, I produced articles on key technologies on which BT Research was focused.



The competition involved undergraduates being invited to propose innovative applications based on those key technologies. Winners received cash prizes and the opportunity to undertake a placement with BT. Whilst at BT, they were provided with guidance and mentoring. Seven years later, Jeff has taken that initiative one stage further.

After a distinguished career at BT, he is now an advisor and mentor to a number of students and young researchers at the University of Cambridge. This brings me to his email. He recommended I watch a TEDx talk by Tanya Goldhaber, a Cambridge PhD candidate, to whom Jeff has been a mentor since his time at BT. Tanya's talk was titled: "Why the Internet isn't ruining everything".



I watched the talk and was intrigued. Tanya implies that there is a framework by which we can improve the way in which we communicate. Her talk appeals to me from what she said, the examples she gave, and the implications she hinted at. I think her case was further enhanced by her understanding of linguistics. For instance, she refers to a conversational maxim of Paul Grice, the philosopher of language who stated that:

1. Your contribution to the conversation should be as informative as necessary.
2. Your contribution to the conversation should not be more informative than necessary.

What interests me is that it would seem that the principles of conversational efficiency may apply to communication channel effectiveness. When is email appropriate? When is a Facebook message OK? Is it intrusive if I use the phone?

Tanya's TED talk happens against a backdrop of questioning about how we communicate. We are all aware of companies that ban Facebook. Some go further. Just over a year ago Thierry Breton, CEO of Atos demanded a zero email policy. His rationale was that only 10 per cent of the internal emails his employees received were useful.

At the time he said: "We are producing data on a massive scale that is fast polluting our working environments and also encroaching into our personal lives".

He is not alone. Ryan Jones of HootSuite said that "email is an unproductivity tool." In a Fast Company magazine article published in October 2012 he said it "might just be the biggest killer of time and productivity in the office today."

In the social sphere, psychologists voice concerns about how people may have thousands of Facebook friends whom they have never met.

That is why in my view Tanya's talk is especially relevant today. After all, in business we wish to be

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noticed and able to engage and influence others. So if we used the best means of communication, we would surely have an advantage. Would we not?



Tanya may well have an answer. For this reason I will devote my next couple of blogs to discuss her views and theories about this fascinating subject. In the meantime, you can see her TED talk [here](#).

Definitions

TED: Formed in 1984 to bring together people from: Technology, Entertainment, Design. Today it is a “clearinghouse that offers free knowledge and inspiration from the world’s most inspired thinkers...”

Hootsuite: Social media management system for organisations to manage campaigns across multiple social media sites.

Linguistics: Scientific study of human language.

Miscommunication

I rang British Telecom. I said “I want to report a nuisance caller”, he said “Not you again.”

Never, under any circumstances, take a sleeping pill and a laxative on the same night.

The voices in my head may not be real, but they have some good ideas.

Seriously

“Don’t let the past steal your present”

Cherralea Morgen

“It doesn’t matter where you are. You are nowhere compared to where you can go.”

Bob Proctor

“Never let your memories be greater than your dreams.”

Doug Ivester



We aim to deliver the best communication skills training possible

I hope you enjoyed this blog.

Best wishes,

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