

## 25.11: Communication Channels

### Learning Objectives

- Differentiate between face-to-face, written, oral, Web-based, and other common channels of business communication
- Differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate uses of different communication channels



In communications, a channel is the means of passing information from a sender to a recipient. Determining the most appropriate channel, or medium, is critical to the effectiveness of communication. Channels include oral means such as telephone calls and presentations, and written modes such as reports, memos, and email.

Communication channels differ along a scale from rich to lean. Think about how you would select a steak—some have more fat than others; they are **rich** and full of flavor and body. If, however, you are on a diet and just want the meat, you will select a **lean** steak. Communication channels are the similar: rich channels are more interactive, provide opportunities for two-way communication, and allow both the sender and receiver to read the nonverbal messages. The leanest channels, on the other hand, trim the “fat” and present information without allowing for immediate interaction, and they often convey “just the facts.” The main channels of communication are grouped below from richest to leanest:

- Richest channels: face-to-face meeting; in-person oral presentation
- Rich channels: online meeting; video conference
- Lean channels: teleconference; phone call; voice message; video (e.g., Facetime)
- Leanest channels: blog; report; brochure; newsletter; flier; email; phone text; social media posts (e.g., Twitter, Facebook)

Oral communications tend to be richer channels because information can be conveyed through speech as well as nonverbally through tone of voice and body language. Oral forms of communication can range from a casual conversation with a colleague to a formal presentation in front of many employees. Richer channels are well suited to complex (or potentially unsettling) information, since they can provide opportunities to clarify meaning, reiterate information, and display emotions.

While written communication does not have the advantage of immediacy and interaction, it can be the most effective means of conveying large amounts of information. Written communication is an effective channel when context, supporting data, and detailed explanations are necessary to inform or persuade others. One drawback to written communications is that they can be misunderstood or misinterpreted by an audience that doesn’t have subsequent opportunities to ask clarifying questions or otherwise respond.

The following are some examples of different types of communication channels and their advantages:

- **Web-based communication**, such as email, chat, IM, text, and video conferencing, allows people in different locations to communicate and even “meet” despite differences in geography. Email provides instantaneous written communication; effective for formal notices and updates, as well as informal exchanges. Social media, message boards and forums allow people to instantly post information to a centralized location. Other Web-based communication, such as information presented on a company Web site, is suited for sharing transaction details (such as order confirmation) or soliciting contact information (such as customer phone number and address)
- **Letters** are a more formal method of written communication usually reserved for important messages such as proposals, inquiries, agreements, and recommendations.
- **Presentations** are usually oral and usually include an audiovisual component, like copies of reports, or material prepared in Microsoft PowerPoint or Adobe Flash.
- **Telephone meetings/conference calls** allow for long-distance interaction.

- **Face-to-face meetings** are personal, interactive exchanges that provide the richest communication and are still the preferred method of communication in business.

#### ? Practice Question

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So, we have written and oral channels, channels that range from rich to lean, and then, within those, multiple channels from which the sender can choose. How do you decide the best channel for your message? When deciding which communication channel to use, the following are some of the important factors to consider:

- the audience and their reaction to the message;
- the length of time it will take to convey the information;
- the complexity of the message;
- the need for a permanent record of the communication;
- the degree to which the information is confidential; and
- the cost of the communication.

If you choose the wrong channel—that is, if the channel is not effective for the type of message and meaning you want to create—you are likely to generate misunderstanding and possibly end up making matters worse. Using the wrong channels can impede communication and can even create mistrust. For example, a manager wants to compliment an employee for his work on a recent project. She can use different approaches and channels to do this. She could send the an employee a text: “Hey, nice work on the project!” Or she could send him an email containing the same message. She could also stop by his desk and personally compliment him. She could also praise him in front of the whole department during a meeting. In each case the message is the same, but the different channels alter the way the message is perceived. If the employee spent months working on the project, getting a “Hey, nice work on the project!” text message or email might seem like thin praise—insulting even. If the employee is shy, being singled out for praise during a departmental meeting might be embarrassing. A face-to-face compliment during a private meeting might be received better. As you can see, getting the channel right is just as important as sending the right message.

#### ? Practice Question

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