

DEATH OF A SALESMAN



Too much typing, not enough talking – business needs the phone

Just a decade ago, we conducted the majority of our business communications by speech. Today the majority are typed. Email and texting behaviour, which then would have been thought of as bizarre, is now conditioned into us. In terms of new business activity have we gained from this?

Ten years ago the email medium was adopted by all of us as an easier way to send informal business communications, quickly replacing the fax where images weren't required. It was the perfect medium for routine information that needed to arrive quickly. Paper letters were preferred for formal situations and for where branding statements were necessary, but the phone was the only instrument for transacting - for doing business.

How soon the sheer convenience of email enabled it to take over as the primary communication tool. From the most casual office gossip to conveying instructions important and petty, and holding entire conversations in real-time – all the things that used to take place over the phone were now taking place via keyboards.

Email, like the Internet, is voyeuristic. It enables a window on the world and on the individuals within it without much in the way of consequences. It allows people to say things they would never dream of saying face-to-face or on the phone. In this way it brings the sales function within the comfort zone of large numbers of executives who think they're selling – but aren't really. Then as now, the phone can be a very unsettling device, revealing not just emotions but intentions and commitments, truths and lies via inflexion, intonation, pauses and sighs. It favours a sometimes-inconvenient requirement for instant decisions, for on-the-spot opinion. Some were and are, totally unafraid of the phone, confident of their ability to control their emotions in this intimate, high-octane medium. Others found their voice when email arrived. Disconnected from the pressures of speech-based interaction, email protects those anxious about giving things away, about making mistakes or losing control of the situation. A decade ago we had no choice but to use the phone if we wanted to do business. Now, if we want to, we can shelter behind email and still do business efficiently - yet only if our written communication capabilities are sufficient. In an age of uncertain standards in this area, ironically, there

may be an inverse relationship between the success of email and our general ability to communicate.

As a business 'letter' email allows cheap, rapid, precise, one-way communication, and further down the line helps with clarity and confirmation too. But for creative thought and spontaneous interrogative exploration, which good business requires, its limitations put business in a send-and-receive slow lane, where there's ambiguity, error and confusion and at worst - fantasy and delusion. Over-reliance on email promotes a bunker business mentality.

In this day and age the phone continues to have serious advantages over typed communication. It allows you to question, to interpret and be interpreted, and to alter the boundaries. Above all it enables both parties to probe quickly and easily for the information they need to agree (or not) to transact – and if not - what the basis for a transaction might be. There is a degree of verve about the phone and also of courage. It allows you to jump in at the deep-end and see what happens. It favours the fearless and the psychologically intact.

There's someone we know who picks up the phone to deal with absolutely everything in their business and personal lives. Though we've all been sold the seductive messages of the digital age and wired ourselves up to the matrix, this individual gets more business done, faster and more efficiently (whilst in the process building better relationships) than someone hammering away on their keyboard all day ever will.

If we want to say something really important we'd all probably still reach for the phone. If we want to say something to get our position accurately on the record or cover our backs, we'd probably use email. Both mediums have their roles to play and they work very well in combination – one enabling creative and lateral communication – the other acting to confirm things and to supply bulk information. But we increasingly rely on email to do both. This is perverse, lazy and bad for business. We should be careful, or we may remove from our commercial culture its most effective business tool.