Communication Events and Technologies

Chapter Learning Objectives

- Recognize the structural, format and linguistic expectations for communicating in ***several common business events***: the conversation, meeting, interview, and presentation.
- Recognize the structural, format and linguistic expectations in ***several traditional business documents***: the letter, memo, email, and report.
- Recognize the correct use of ***common communication technologies*** of contemporary business: telephones, electronic mail, virtual meetings, presentation media, and websites.

Applying the Businesslike Style

The goals and practices of business create a business style of communication (See Creating Businesslike Messages.), which leads to consistent structural, formatting, and stylistic characteristics across multiple documents, events and communication technologies. Once you are familiar with the expectations, they become guidelines to create communication that is comfortable, predictable and effective for business audiences.

> Gary Baker has been a CPA, a Project Manager, and a Director of Technical Support. "When someone wants a job done, the first question should be 'has anyone done this before and who has a copy?' Doing the job 'right' is at least partly about doing so it looks like it's supposed to look." (See also Johns, 1989)

While this section is divided into separate chapters to cover different communication forms, they are used together in the business world, in complicated, interrelated ways; "texts do not occur in isolation from each other, and the written and spoken mode of text production are often symbolically connected" {Bargiela, 1999 23}. A decision-making conversation can start during an informal meeting in the hallway, continue as an IM chat until it turns into a formal email with copies that are printed out and posted on a bulletin board. Along the way, there might be a couple of phone calls to clarify some points, and somebody comes up with a great graphic interpretation of the major points that will wind up in presentation at another meeting next week.

> When co-workers talk about a "meeting," they are referring to the email that announced the meeting, the printed agenda as well as the "hidden" agenda that was discussed in the lunchroom earlier, the presentation that was made during the meeting, and the handouts that were distributed as an email attachment afterward.

Similarly, virtually any technology can be used to create nearly any document or event. Memos can be created on paper or sent electronically as emails. Meetings can be held face-to-face, by teleconference, or online. Information can be organized as reports and kept in filing cabinets, or posted on an intranet for worldwide access. A webpage can be created using any combination of static documents, multi-media graphics, and interactive software.

> As you move into a particular profession or industry, you will probably discover several subdivisions or types of each of these typical business communications, as well as a few special documents. *Press*

releases, *contracts* and *audit work papers* are documents common to public relations, legal and accounting departments in virtually any business. If you enter those professions, you will need to learn their specific requirements. You will also find that every organization and individual manager has developed certain habits of communication; your success will depend on your ability to notice and follow those preferences as well. Each communication situation will call for its own unique, appropriate response. Your job is to learn the expectations of your organization and clients and meet them, although you'll find that audiences always appreciate communication that is organized, formatted and phrased in expected ways.

Communication Events

Most communication in the workplace is oral. From social interaction in the office to formal sales calls to meetings and interviews, the typical manager spends most of his or her day engaged in oral communication (Mintzberg, 1975). The range of talk that goes on in the workplace is tremendous, but several key events make up most of the communication: conversations, meetings, interviews, and presentations.

The Conversation

One of the most basic communication skills that human beings ever learn is to take turns talking, creating the dialogue of a conversation. We typically think of conversations as unscripted and even random communication. Two (or a few) people will often "strike up a conversation" simply because they are human beings with the capacity for language. Many unscripted and random conversations do occur within business organizations; human beings who spend time together will inevitably engage in this kind of conversation.

When the participants acknowledge the *business* purpose of a conversation, however, the tone and structure of the exchange take on the distinctive character of *businesslike* communication: goal oriented, task structured, efficiently composed, and carefully designed. Often, people begin a conversation in an unscripted way, but then shift to a more serious tone when they realize they have "business to conduct."

Two team members might happen to meet at the photocopier, for instance, and talk for a few minutes about nothing in particular. One might then recall a team-related topic that requires some clarification, and shift from social to business conversation, with a task related statement or question, "Hey, I've been meaning to ask you about that request you put in for a new micrometer." At other times, someone will initiate a conversation with a task statement, or even make an appointment to "talk about" a topic.

A key skill for effective business conversations is to recognize that it is a goal-directed exchange that should conform to the structural and stylistic expectations of the business environment. Whether the conversation shifted from social to business, or was begun as a business conversation, the participants are expected to follow the businesslike structure introduced in Chapter Five to accomplish the stated goals of the exchange: clarify the context of the conversation, exchange the relevant information, and determine an action step appropriate to the conversation goals.

Define the Context

Generally, a business conversation will stick to only a single, relevant topic of business, and often it will begin with an agreement to spend a specific amount of time in conversation and accomplish a specific goal. As the conversation begins or shifts to business, someone will clarify the agenda.

> ***A good conversation starter:*** "Do you have a couple of minutes to decide what day to hold the regional meeting?"

Clarify the agenda Everyone involved should be clear about the conversation's purpose before going on to the discussion.

> After touring the plant, two operations supervisors might have a conversation to compare their perceptions of the production line's efficiency. Or, they might choose to make a decision about promoting one of the foremen. Unless they both agree on the purpose of the conversation, they will both feel frustrated that the conversation was "ineffective."

Clarify the time available Similarly, everyone should be aware of the expected duration of the communication. A conversation could be a two minute update, a 20 minute exploration of issues, or a two hour heart-to-heart to work out a solution to a problem. Unless everyone involved is able to spend the same amount of time, the conversation is likely to be ineffective and frustrating.

Share Information

A conversation, by definition, is a cooperative effort, and all participants must cooperatively organize it to accomplish a purpose. Whether stated or not, the participants will have an agenda for the conversation—an idea of what they think they are communicating about. Effective communicators will use this agenda to organize their conversations.

Keep the mental checklist in mind. Insure that all necessary points are covered over the course of the conversation. For an involved topic or multiple points, it is appropriate to prepare a written checklist or keep notes while having the conversation.

Keep the conversation on track. If one participant seems to be introducing a new topic, or spending too long on a point that has already been resolved, others are responsible for clarifying the relevance of the statement. Everyone involved in a businesslike, purposeful conversation should be watching the verbal and non-verbal cues that indicate understanding, agreement, disagreement, and relevance of the talk to conversational purpose.

Create an Action Step

An effective conversation will end with an agreement about "who does what by when." There should be a clear understanding of whatever decisions, solutions or questions have been agreed upon, and someone will typically summarize all action that is to be taken as a result of the conversation.

If there seems to be no action plan resulting from a conversation, its participants were probably doing something wrong:

chatting about something not related to a business purpose,

talking to the wrong person about the issues, or

communicating the information poorly.

Conversational Style and Demeanor

Compared to a pleasant social conversation, business talk can seem boring, humorless, and stuffy. When the lunchroom conversation turns to business, voices drop a few tones, faces get serious, and the participants begin to give each other the verbal and non-verbal cues that structure the communication as a business message.

This does not mean that people are unpleasant to each other during a conversation. In fact, a pleasant tone of voice, good eye contact, and attentiveness to each other's feelings are important aspects of effective conversation. On the other hand, this is not a time for rambling talk, joke telling, giggling, fidgeting, or physical horseplay.

The Meeting

A meeting can be defined as "gathering together for a limited period of time for the purpose of communication" (Fulk & Collins, 2001 625), and millions of meetings take place each day as people coordinate their tasks, pass information to each other, make decisions, and solidify organizational relationships. Managers report spending from 20% to more than 60% of their time in meetings (Fulk & Collins, 2001), and as an individual moves upward through the managerial ranks, the proportion of time in meetings expands. Members of middle management spend 30% of their time in meetings (*How to Conduct Successful Meeting*, 2001), top executives as much as 80% .

> A "staff meeting" is typically held on a regular basis to coordinate the activities of everyone involved in a department or job responsibility. All the customer service managers at one German manufacturer meet for about two hours every other week to review the current status of projects and action items (Meier, 2003).

Formal meetings are scheduled ahead of time for a particular time and place, for the purpose of communicating on a particular set of topics. In reality, individuals are often "called to a meeting" without any consultation or agreement, and those attending a meeting will sometimes ignore or even deliberately sabotage its stated purpose. These factors will result in ineffective meetings, one of the biggest headaches in the contemporary workplace.

According to a 2005 survey, workers spend an average of 5.6 hours a week in meetings and rate 69% of them as "ineffective" (*Two wasted days at work*, 2005).

Effective meeting communication skills can greatly enhance a business person's reputation as an effective leader, and the steps follow the three steps of defining the context, effectively structuring the information exchange, and defining a clear action step.

Define the Context

A good meeting begins with participants who are clear about its purposes and a meeting venue that allows those purposes to be fulfilled. Generally, the person who decides to arrange a meeting is responsible for meeting these requirements by,

inviting the participants whose presence is required for the task at hand. A productive meeting includes everyone who needs to be there, but no one who doesn't.

preparing meeting participants for productive communication with a clear indication of their meeting task and the preparation needed to perform it. This is usually done by circulating an *agenda* to the invitees ahead of the meeting.

scheduling the meeting in a properly equipped room, which includes sufficient space to comfortably accommodate the group as well as the technology required to accomplish the group's tasks. Meetings can take place nearly anywhere, from a multi-media conference room to the tailgate of a job-site truck, but suitability of the location to the meeting's purposes is an important factor in effective communication.

Some meetings are such regular events that no one seems to be making any arrangements at all. A staff meeting might be scheduled to occur every Tuesday, for example, and everyone simply shows up without any invitation or reminder. Even a regular meeting will follow an understood agenda, however, and a productive meeting will begin with a verification that all participants are in agreement about its purposes.

Share Information

Meetings can serve a number of purposes, and the structure of the information sharing will vary with its goal. Regardless of the specific goal or format, meeting productivity will be greater when its participants communicate according to a common structure (Rothwell, 1998). Effective meeting facilitation thus involves guiding the group through a structured process of communication.

Meeting facilitation can be done by a single individual who acts as the meeting leader, on as a collective effort on the part of several attendees. Self-directed teams will often rotate the meeting facilitation duties, and sometimes a group will have an administrative staff available to handle the task. Regardless of who facilitates, the process includes several key components:

control the flow of information The meeting agenda and the structure that will be followed determine the kind and quantity of information that will be needed at each stage of the communication. An agenda item that calls for "reports from each of the team leaders," for example, will be most efficiently handled if each team leader speaks in turn, for roughly the same amount of time, and provides comparable data. It would be the facilitator's job to insure that each team leader had a chance to speak, that no individual took an inappropriately long time to speak, and that each speaker provided all the expected and relevant information.

summarize and check perceptions As each agenda item is completed, the group as a whole must be brought into sync before it can productively turn to the next. This is particularly true with the agenda involves a sequential communication structure, such as a decision-making protocol or a conflict resolution method. The facilitator should insure that everyone is in agreement that each step is completed, often with a simple statement that the group is ready to move on; "so, we all agree then, that the problem we should be addressing first is the handicapped parking requirement." Often, misunderstandings occur because participants think they agree, when in reality they've "heard" very different things during the meeting discussion. A good facilitator will paraphrase key points to make sure everyone agrees on the interpretation or impact.

attention to social dynamics Meetings inevitably occur within the complex mix of organizational politics, interpersonal relationships, and individual personality differences. Even though these factors are separate from the immediate meeting task, they will influence the ways people talk to each other. A skillful meeting facilitator will be attentive to these dynamics and take the time to appropriately encourage, discourage, or even mediate the interactions among participants.

monitor the group memory Most meetings are recorded in some way, either with meeting minutes or as part of the group's task documentation. The facilitator should see that all key decisions, information, or future actions are properly recorded. In addition, new issues will often come up during a meeting or participants will realize that a topic cannot be covered until further information is obtained or other people are present. The facilitator will then create a document to record these items for later action. The recording mechanism can be as simple as notes jotted on a tablet. Often flip charts are used to create a visual "group memory" that can be brought to future meetings. Various technologies are available to create notes on a whiteboard or laptop computer, which can then be distributed electronically or incorporated as part of the meeting minutes.

> George Muller comments...
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> "One of the most important factors in a good meeting is the consistent use of certain rituals. I've conducted hundreds of meetings between adjusters and lawyers over the years, and it's the structure of the meeting that provides its purpose and effectiveness. The ritual loses its strength when not everyone is aware or the codes of conduct or ritualistic process that should be followed.

Create an Action Summary

Every meeting should end with a summary session, during which the group reviews the decisions that have been made, the responsibilities that have been assigned, and relevant follow-up dates and actions. Often a date is set for the next conversation or meeting. The facilitator will verify that the goals of the meeting have been met to everyone's satisfaction or clarify how any remaining issues will be handled. Generally all of this information will be included in a written document, either formal meeting minutes or as informal "notes" that a team or supervisor keeps about the meeting.

Informal Meetings

Most people refer to prearranged meetings as meetings, but meeting purposes, venues and technical characteristics can vary widely and happen without any planning at all. Participants might think of informal meetings as simple "conversations" at the photocopy room or the coffee machine, but they serve important functions in an organization (Fayard & Weeks, 2004; Katz & Kahn, 1966; Mangrum, Fairley, & Wieder, 2001; Peters & Waterman, 1982). Whenever these conversations turn to business topics, following the principles of effective meeting facilitation will make the communication more productive.

- Be watchful that any information that is shared or decisions that are made are treated seriously,

- take appropriate notes, and

- insure that the meeting ends with a summary of the actions each person will take.

Meeting Documents

Although a meeting is usually thought of as an oral, face-to-face communication event, a large part of any meeting's success as a communication event comes from the documents that are prepared before the meeting, used to facilitate the meeting, and distributed after the meeting as a permanent record of the communication that occurred.

A meeting agenda is a written document, typically a single sheet of paper that is distributed prior to a meeting to specify its purpose, participants and preparation required for productive meeting communication. Sometimes changes are made to an agenda after the meeting invitation is issued, and those changes will be included on a revised agenda that is distributed at the meeting.

Usually a group has designated one person to take the minutes of the meeting. This person will usually be selected for his or her ability to take accurate, detailed notes as the meeting progresses, but a good minute taker will confirm that the final document agrees with the facilitator's meeting notes and the notes of other meeting participants as well.

Depending on the type of group and meeting, the minutes might be typed for distribution in written or electronic form. Sometimes they are kept as handwritten notes, especially if there is no distribution beyond the team files, although most minute takers find that they are more complete and accurate when they take a few minutes to type the notes up with complete sentences and full words.

Distribution

Generally, anyone who was expected at the meeting but unable to attend will be provided with a copy of the meeting minutes. Supervisors and other interested parties will often receive copies as well. In all cases, a copy of the minutes will be placed in the team project files.

Review meeting minutes as soon as you receive a copy to refresh your own memory of the decisions and action steps that affect you. A copy will be kept with the rest of the project documents, so you might not need to keep your own copy, but be sure that you have noted any information items in your own record keeping system (Volkema).

The Interview

The interview is a special type of meeting designed for one person to get information from another. A job interview, appraisal interview, exit interview or disciplinary interview each involves its own special set of questions and appropriate answers, but the format remains the same. As with any other meeting, the person who sets up the event is often the facilitator, usually referred to as the interviewer. Once again, effective businesslike communication results from establishing a clear context, structuring the information exchange effectively, and clarifying the action to follow.

Define the Context

Business interviews include an introductory stage when the context is defined when the participants arrive (on time, or a few minutes early) and greet each other. Both the interviewer and the interviewee want to establish a positive relationship before getting down to business. Smiles, handshakes and good eye contact are all signals used to assure each other that both parties want to engage in honest and open communication. This is also the time to clarify any ground rules: will answers be recorded electronically or in writing? Is the interviewee giving permission to be quoted? Will the interview write up be reviewed by the interviewee before any publication?

Share Information

The normal structure is for the interviewer to ask a series of questions, which the interviewee (or interviewees) answer. The bulk of the interview is spent in gathering and giving information. The interviewer should prepare questions ahead of time, and generally the interviewee prepares answers, information or resources to answer the questions. Sometimes an interviewer provides written questions ahead of time, or perhaps a list of topic he or she wishes to cover. Although the information is usually flowing from the interviewee to the interviewer, an interviewer will often allow the interviewee to ask a few questions or make a statement.

Create an Action Summary

At the end of any interview, either the interviewer or the interviewee can initiate a summary and action step. Both parties will clarify the next step, which generally involves the use of the information gathered in the interview. A clarification of any continued communication or business relationship is also in order. After the interview, it is often appropriate for one party or the other to send a thank you letter, note or email.

The Presentation

There are many different kinds of presentations in a typical business organization, ranging from short, informal summaries of information to co-workers, to formal demonstrations in clients' conference rooms, to carefully staged multi-media roll-outs at major industry or press events. Presentations can thus vary dramatically in length, preparation, and production features, and different industries, organizations and departments will also have their own expectations of how presentations ought to be done.

Types of Presentations

Motivational talks: These are often delivered with a highly enthusiastic delivery style, and often depend on personal narratives to help audience members envision themselves taking the action being proposed.

Status report*:* Participants in a large or long-term project might be asked to present the status of their work to peers or supervisors. The presentation generally includes a description of the project's goals, progress toward those goals, and a discussion of the upcoming action required to meet them.

Sales presentation*:* Probably the most common of formal business presentations, the point is to explain how a product or service can meet the needs of a client. The company will generally provide sales people with detailed information and visual support to explain the facts about products, and the action step is often referred to as "the close."

Performance explanation*:* An individual with an area of managerial responsibility might be required to explain his or her performance in front of peers, often at a quarterly or annual meeting. Organizational politics generally require a focus on achievements rather than failures, and the action step should support company objectives rather than advocate change. This is not an appropriate venue for excuses and complaints, which should be handled in a more private communication situation.

Ceremonial moments*:* Every business gathering, from a weekly staff meeting to the annual stockholder meeting to a company retirement party, can include some ceremonial speaking. New employees, speakers, and guests are formally introduced to the group. Individuals are recognized for contributions to the team. Co-workers are thanked. The situation generally does not need much definition, and any action step is usually an implied message that everyone should emulate the person being singled out.

Training presentation: Many training presentations are formal "classroom" style events, but workers often provide informal reviews of new procedures or job-related information for just a few co-workers.

Regardless of the specific context and purpose of the presentation, it will conform to the structure of any business message with a contextualizing introduction, an organized body of information, and a clear explanation of the action the audience is expected to take.

David Eastman, says a successful presentation just answers three simple questions: What's up? So What? And Now What? (Eastman, 1999).

Define the Context

Business speakers are generally introduced before they speak, and the audience has been gathered to hear something of importance. A speaker will have only a couple of minutes to summarize the point of the presentation and explain why the audience needs the information. If audience members detect their time is likely to be wasted, they will soon begin making notes for their *own* presentation or planning some project they wish they could be back at the office working on.

- ***Get to the point quickly*** Avoid starting a business presentation with a long personal introduction, an unrelated joke or comment, or a complicated preview of the speech organization.

Establish an identity Speakers are generally known to the audience or formally introduced, but the speaker will establish the context with a visual representation of identity: an introductory slide with the company name and logo, a logo mounted on the lectern or behind the speaker, a name badge on the jacket.

Present Information

Most professionals have access to far more information than they have time to talk about in a presentation, and the keys to effective communication in this format are selecting just the right amount of information and organizing it to best meet the communication goals of the situation.

The exact organization will vary, of course, but business audiences do expect information to consist, for the most part, of evidence, logic, and numerical analysis. There can be situations that call for emotional appeals or personal stories, but presenters are generally judged to be most effective when they provide

relevant information

in the most productive versions, whether graphical, visual, or as hands-on demonstrations,

in support of clearly explicit claims or main points.

It is crucial that a speaker present information clearly, succinctly, and in a format that is useful and memorable for the audience. Often, handouts are used to help listeners remember key facts or procedures, and the speaker guides the audience through complicated ideas by directing its attention to visual images, graphs, or diagrams.

Provide an Action Step

Every presentation should close with a clear action step. Whether the presentation is instructional or supervisory and the speaker has the authority to require specific action, or the speaker is attempting to persuade an audience that a particular course of action is desirable, there should be no doubt about what upcoming action the speaker desires.

Presentation Style and Demeanor

Regardless of the context and the specific type of presentation, business speakers are distinguished by a certain style that reflects the gamut of verbal and non-verbal cues of a ***serious***, ***polished,*** carefully ***prepared*** “professional” business image.

serious This is not to say that business speakers are never creative or humorous, but the first priority is to clearly and directly provide the information needed to accomplish a task. A business presentation will typically begin with a careful explanation of its purposes and goals, and every element of the presentation should relate directly to the purpose of the communication.

polished The prototypical business style includes careful attire and speech, coupled with a dynamic interactivity with the audience. A presentation, by definition, does not typically include complete dialogue with the audience. (If it did, the event would be called a meeting.) Nevertheless, in all but the largest auditoriums, it is common to invite interaction and to be prepared for interruptions to questions as audience members take responsibility for clarifying the information being presented.

prepared An accomplished business speaker will almost never refer to 3x5 index cards or a manuscript, but will instead create the impression of an enthusiastic conversation partner who just happens to be speaking at length, perhaps referring now and then to a sheet of paper or a legal pad.

For the contemporary business speaker, interaction with the audience goes considerably beyond basic eye contact. The growing interactivity of multimedia communication has changed the sense of who controls the flow of information (Lindstrom, 1994 9). Audiences are becoming used to Internet search engines and touchtone kiosks that deliver the exact information they want exactly when they need it. Even in a formal presentation before a large audience, contemporary eloquence requires an honest interaction with the audience; the speaker must provide information, ideas and explanations as the audience "asks for" them. Don't expect any audience to listen to you without interruption for more than 18 minutes; polite audiences might feign attention, but their minds are elsewhere unless you invite them to join you in the conversation (Decker & Denney, 1992).

Typical Documents

Everyone in a business career creates documents of one kind or another, with the typical worker spending between 20% and 50% of his time writing (Beaufort, 1999). A wide variety of documents are created, with a variety of purposes: transferring information, maintaining control and accountability, keeping records, building relationships, making decisions and solving problems. Just a few basic formats account for most of the writing. Letters and memos are written regularly by over 90% of business employees, now often created as emails, and short reports are prepared by three-quarters of them.

Unclear writing costs U.S. business more than a billion dollars annually (Hansen, 1993).

The Business Letter

The business letter is the most formal of business documents, and typically used for external communication. The use of the letter dates back to the middle ages, when the form was developed as an official, legal and highly standardized method of "speaking" a king's words to far-flung reaches of an empire (Perelman, 1991 98-99). Letters are still considered the most "official" statement of a company and can be acceptable as a contracting document. It is thus extremely important that any letter be written with care; your words can be construed as a binding agreement.

Occasionally a letter is drafted for internal use, for example, to make a formal offer of a promotion or award, or to notify an employee that he or she is being terminated. Most letters are sent to people outside the company, however, and provide communication with clients, customers, and vendor.

Form Letters

A form letter is a common business tool that follows the format of a formal business letter exactly, differing only in that the same letter is sent to multiple recipients. Often, a writer will compose a standard letter that can be used repeatedly. An accounts payable clerk, for instance, might create a letter to explain the company's check creation policies and schedules to a new contractor. By keeping the letter as a ***template***[1], the clerk simply types the address and salutation and sends the same "form" letter to each new vendor. When the letter is too generic, however, a reader can be insulted by the seeming insincerity of the letter.

The form letter begins to lose its status as a "real" business letter when it is sent to multiple anonymous recipients. A customer service department might need to notify thousands of customers about a manufacturing defect, or a sales person might want to send a letter introducing a new product to every potential client in his territory. Some would argue that simply addressing the document to "Dear Customer" or "Dear Sir or Madam," does not make it a letter (Sless, 1999), and it should be considered an announcement or advertisement. In fact, in one study, the recipients of such letters did not even notice when the greeting and signature lines were absent (Sless, 1999).

Newsletters

For routine, impersonal messages from company to employees or customers, the traditional memo or letter has been largely replaced by a more journalistic format, the newsletter. A newspaper-like columned format allows the writer to cover several topics, eliminating the need for a "blizzard" of memos or letters, and even allows the inclusion of photos, humor, or personal topics that might be considered inappropriate in the traditional memo.

Further, customers have learned to throw away advertising letters, and employees can be insulted by repeated memos, or by the impersonal nature of memos that are sent by an unseen upper management to "all employees."   A newsletter, on the other hand, looks like a newspaper, which no one expects to be personally addressed. Employees and customers alike are more likely to welcome and trust information that comes to them as "news" document.

Newsletters are typically produced with desktop publishing software, although a simple newsletter can be created with virtually any word processing program. Contributions to a newsletter will typically be provided to an editor, who will provide writers with the specific format required by the company.

College graduates with the best writing skills make, on average, three times more money than those with the weakest—Stephen Reder, Portland State University(A. Fisher, 1998)0

The Memo

A memo is a short, internal document that is generally used to summarize information on a single topic. A standardized heading includes all the details about its origin, audience and subject; a quick glance is all it takes to know what the document is to be used for or where it ought to be filed (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992). Memos can be used for giving instructions, providing information, proposing new action or policies, or for summarizing a problem or decision issues. They are virtually always created as internal documents, providing information or instructions to others within the company.

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[1] A ***template*** is any format for a communication into which the specifics of the particular message are inserted. Microsoft, for instance, has created templates for memos, resumes, and presentations that are available for users of Word or PowerPoint. Many organizations create templates for routine communications, including form letters as well as regular reports, procedure updates, sales calls, and any other kind of regular communication. Templates will often include standard phrases, paragraphs, or whole sections of text that are often referred to as ***boilerplate***.

Memos are less formal than letters and written in a direct, brief style, but are a more permanent and "official" way of communicating than sending an email or starting a casual conversation. Both the sender and the receiver of a memo are often expected to keep a copy, and the file copy of a memo will often be used as the permanent record of the information it summaries. Memos should always be written carefully, correctly and completely. Others might refer to the memo many years later to find out what was known about a topic or how an event was handled.[2]

Memos depart slightly from the standard context-information-action structure in that the first paragraph typically includes both a statement of the purpose and the desired action. The assumption is that a busy reader will read *only* the first paragraph, filing the memo in an appropriate place for later reference or action.

The information covered in a memo is provided in a succinct way, and can even be somewhat abrupt, as compared to the more formal letter style. The memo is an internal document, so readers are presumed to know quite a bit about the business under discussion.

Occasionally a memo will extend to a second page, but a typical memo is only two or three paragraphs and fits onto one page. When the content takes more than a page to cover, it will typically be provided as one or more attachments, which are listed on the memo.

> EXPENSIVE MEMOS. The cost of writing memos has a high price tag, according to a recent study by IWCC Training in Communications, a Toronto consulting firm. Planning, composing, and editing a routine memo takes an average of 54 minutes. Writing one memo costs almost $82, based on an annual employee salary of $35,000. And the annual cost of writing one memo per week? $4,258.60. (Cynthia E. Griffin, "Bad Words," Entrepreneur, February 2000, 34.)

Long Memos

Sometimes a long narrative is necessary to accomplish the goal of the document, and multiple page memos are common in some industries. A memo that details all the resources and commitments that have been made on a major project, for example, or a memo summarizing the status of a complicated insurance claim, might be several pages long. Such a document is not meant to be read quickly by a reader, but is usually created to serve as a permanent and complete record of an event, transaction, or issue.

A long memo can be very long—20 to 30 pages or even longer—but follows the same format as a standard memo, simply extending to as many pages as necessary. A company that uses the form regularly might have special formatting requirements, often requiring that specific sections be included to cover information that is called for every time.

Informal Memos

Beyond the formal memos, which are typically created as a permanent record, a host of informal documents are used to keep information flowing through the organization. While the formats might

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[2] Office workers will often kid each other about a failure to know something obvious by asking, "didn't you get the memo?"

vary considerably from company to company, a businesslike structure and style will still insure that they are perceived as business messages and used accordingly.

Handwritten Notes

A business message is never unimportant simply because it is handwritten. One survey blamed 94% of mistakes that occur in business on illegible handwriting ("Sloppy Handwriting a Key Cause of Office Mistakes," 1995). Huge amounts of crucial communication, from telephone messages, to order entry, to a supervisor's instructions, will be created by hand, and each of these messages can be as important to the business as a formal letter or an email. Incorrectly filed insurance claims, wrong information provided to customers, fouled up stock trades, shipping problems ignored because a phone message was unintelligible, or checks cashed for the wrong amount can all cost a company money.

Often, companies that rely heavily on handwritten communication will use standardized forms to insure that all the necessary information is included in the message. Whether the form is a pad of pink phone messages or a complex order blank, the user should provide all the information requested. Otherwise, he or she will write "none" or the information is "not available" ("n/a") to clarify that the blank was not simply forgotten or ignored.

Whether it is a form or a plain piece of paper, messages usually include the date written (in some cases the exact time as well), the name or initials of the writer, and contact information.

Notices, Bulletins and Procedures

Internal messages can be formatted in a variety of other ways, with information posted on bulletin boards, for example, or distributed with employee paychecks. Often these messages take the form of an abbreviated memo, or a company might have developed a particular format to designate specific types of procedures or instructions.

Regardless of the exact format, messages should be consistent so that readers quickly recognize their content or goals. When an accounting department consistently uses Arial font table on purple paper to indicate a change in accounting procedures, for example, workers begin to look for accounting procedures in an Arial font table on purple paper. They are more likely to ignore or misunderstand procedural changes that come as a memo on blue paper, or even judge the document to be "inappropriate" and its writer to be "unbusinesslike."

If changes in a format are necessary, make them slowly and subtly over time, or, introduce a whole new document to replace the old one. Once a format has become familiar to readers, any changes will be seen as "mistakes" rather than improvements.

The Report

The prototypical document to gather and organize business data is the report. Companies create reports in a wide variety of formats, but they can all be understood as modifications of a basic model. Some reports will leave out one or more parts, or an organization will occasionally create a special section that meets some particular internal need. Most reports are no more than five pages long.

The writer who is asked to create a report, will need to find out which is expected—a full ***formal report***, a ***short report*** that does not include every element, an ***informal report*** that is often formatted as a long, multi-page memo, or a ***specialized format*** that is unique to the company or industry.

The most formal report includes most or all of these components described here, and as elements are left out, the report becomes less formal. Informal reports can look like a long memo or even a computer printout or the results of a database query, but whatever its purpose and form, a report must include basic information to insure that readers will know how to use its content:

Who created the report, including the writer's name as well as his or her department or company.

The date the report was produced.

An identifying title, which will generally give some indication of the report's purpose or scope.

> Debb Ahrens-Vandahaar is sometimes asked to provide a report on her prospective clients' wish lists for management training courses. The report will be used later in a meeting with the organization's director and contract trainers. No action will be decided until after the discussion, though, so Deb includes no recommended action in her report.

Frontmatter

The report provides its contextualizing information in a series of introductory pages, while the information is provided in the main pages of the report. Depending on the purpose of the report, the action step might appear as a separate recommendation section, or the report might be providing only limited information within the scope of a larger set of actions.

Title Page

A formal title page provides all the identifying information for the report, as well as a visual "first impression" and a protective covering.

The information on the title page allows the reader to know who produced the document and when it was prepared, with an assumption that the report could be pulled out of a file sometime in the distant future. An unknown future reader would need to find the

title of the report

organization sponsoring the report, including sufficient address for contact

intended recipients of the report

date prepared, or in some cases the date actually published

author of the report, including any title or organizational affiliation

The information on the title page should be spaced so that it is striking, pleasing to the eye and professional. This is not normally a place for cute illustrations, but there is often large, bold type that catches the eye. Additional graphic elements, such as lines or shading, can add to the overall polished, professional effect.

Sometimes a title page is printed on a heavy weight stock so that it forms a front cover. Often, this kind of a cover page gives just the title and author and perhaps some sort of illustration. Then a second complete title page is place directly behind the cover. This format looks most like a published book and is generally used only for very large reports or those intended to be sold like books.

Letter of Authorization

The letter of authorization documents the official permission or order to produce the report and often gives explicit instructions regarding the proper content and readership of the document. This might be literally a letter, but it can be any kind of document. This is an optional item, but can be extremely important. Sometimes this letter functions as the payment authority for the research or analysis project; other times it provides the legal or organizational authority to release the report's information to the reader.

Letter of Transmittal

This letter is addressed to the primary reader of the report and is signed by the author, or in some cases by a representative of the publishing organization. The letter should specify the purpose of the report, identify all its intended readers, and provide sufficient information that anyone receiving a copy understands the report's function.

Especially if there is no letter of authorization, the transmittal letter would explain who asked for the report and why. Even when there is a separate letter of authorization, the author of a report will generally explain his or her own understanding of the report's purpose and scope. The transmittal letter is not simply a summary of the report's contents, but exhibits organizational sensitivity, providing the "political" context that surrounds the report and functioning to tell the reader *how* to read the report by providing such information as

- the significance of the report to the reader or the organization,
- any difficulties that were encountered in creating the report (especially if the result is something different from what was authorized or expected),
- gratitude for help in researching or preparing the report,
- the necessity for follow-up or further investigation, and
- complete information for contacting the report's author, or anyone else who might need to provide additional information or clarification.

Table of Contents

Everything after the title page should be listed in a table of contents. Transmittal and authorization letters might not actually have numbers on them, but they will be included in the "count" and all preliminary pages will be given a lower case Roman numeral as a page number. The body of the report itself begins with page "1" and every main heading should be shown on the title page with the appropriate page number.

List of Illustrations

When the report contains several visuals, a list is often provided as a convenience to the reader. This would be set up like a table of contents, with each figure, chart or graph titled or numbered and the corresponding page number provided.

List of Tables

As with illustrations, a list can be provided if you include multiple tables in a report. If there are only a couple of tables along with other illustrations, the two lists might be combined as a list of "figures."

Executive Summary

Depending on the size and type of report, the executive summary briefly paraphrases all the information in the report or provides only the main points. In either case, the executive summary should never be more than one page long, even for a very lengthy report.

The purpose of the executive summary (sometimes called a synopsis or simply a summary) is to provide the busy reader with a quick, concise overview of the report. This is not a *description* of the report or an *introduction*, but a condensed and abbreviated version of the report's *content*. Usually, the executive summary will make no mention of appendices and does not include any citations, tables or illustrations. It can provide key statistics, however, when they support key findings or conclusions. It should be possible for a busy reader to understand the key information from this single page, and to gain enough knowledge of the report's general content to make an informed decision regarding the need to read further.

Informative Body

In general, the business report follows the normal structure of all business messages: define the **situation**, give the **facts** and propose the **action,** although the specific subsections will be organized in a way that makes sense in the specific situation.

Context or Problem Statement

The first section of the report describes the reason the report is being written for its specific audience. Subsections might go into some detail regarding the background of an issue, the facts of the situation, key definitions or concepts, or the history of a problem. At a minimum, the first section of the report will explain the writer's purpose and an explanation of how the report is designed to meet that purpose.

In a formal report, this contextualizing information will also have been provided, at least in summary, in the transmittal letter and the executive summary as well. This allows multiple audiences of the report to understand it in a variety of contexts, but the body of the report will include the most complete and detailed version.

Background Data

If a substantial amount of data is needed to bring a reader up to date with the history of a problem, the facts of the case, or the financial data needed to analyze the situation, it will generally be provided as a separate section. In a short or informal report, this material might be included as an appendix, rather than as a section in the report itself.

Informative and Analytical Sections

In general, the body of the report includes several major sections. Each is begun with a header, and subdivided appropriately with sub-headers and sub-sub headers.

> ***Headers*** are the titles found at the beginning of each section or subsection of the report. These should provide a short, clear description of the contents of the section and should be formatted so a reader can easily follow the outline of the report. Larger, bolder type is used for major sections, with smaller, plainer type used for subsections.

Most industries or professions will use a few specialized reports that will include specific sections. A business plan, a marketing plan, a financial analysis, or a staffing analysis can be recognized as unique types of reports because they contain specific kinds of content, usually arranged in a standard way.

> Barbara Thompson comments....
>
> We sweat blood over the financial reports every year...

In general, the sections will cover such topics as

- an explanation of the methods of analysis that are used to answer the question or determine a solution to the problem being addressed, as well as the justifications for using the method and any disclaimers about its adequacy.

- the demonstration of the reasoning, evidence, and analysis that is performed. In some cases, sections will consist entirely of data or statistical tables and are separately labeled, although large numerical sections are often provided as appendices at the end of the report.

- the conclusions that may be drawn from the analysis.

Action Step

If the report includes an action step, it will appear as one or more sections concerned with recommendation and implementation issues. Implementation may be discussed as a plan for action, with such information such as time lines, production schedules, cost projections, project budgets, or stakeholder interests.

Any recommendations would normally be summarized in the executive summary, but the recommendation section is sometimes placed at the beginning of the report as well. In cases where the report was authorized specifically to make a recommendation, this section might even replace the summary or introduction.

Notes

If endnotes are used, they immediately follow the last page of text. Footnotes and endnotes are not common in business reports, although they are used regularly in certain financial and legal documents.

Works Cited

Any sources cited in the body of the report should be listed here. Include books and articles as well as internet sources, personal interviews, correspondence, data sets, and any other sources of specific information that you have used. Entries can formatted according to a standard bibliographic form, such as that of the American Psychological Association (APA) or the Modern Language Association (MLA), although many businesses adopt a format they find suitable for their own purposes.

Bibliography

A report will sometimes include a bibliography, either instead of or in addition to a list of works cited. Sometimes the two will be combined into a single "works consulted" list. A bibliography can be used to provide the reader with additional information or resources, or to provide comments on the usefulness or availability of information as an "annotated bibliography."

Glossary

A glossary is an alphabetical listing of words appearing in the report that require definition. If there are only a few words that need to be defined, that should be done in the text or as endnotes. Usually a glossary will only be prepared if there are a large number of words to include. If a glossary is used, any words that are included should be highlighted in the text.

Appendices

Any extra documents, charts, samples, survey or research instruments, photographs, computer programs, disks, or transcripts that might be useful for the reader can be provided as appendices. Often, page protectors or divider tabs are used to keep appendices organized. Since appendices are generally something other than "regular" pages, they are usually not numbered, but are labeled instead, and the label is referenced in the text when the reader is directed to the information. Multiple appendices are usually labeled alphabetically (i.e. Appendix A, Appendix B, etc.) and listed separately in the table of contents.

Format

Reports should be created in block format, with single spaced paragraphs lined up along the left hand margin. Headers, bullets, typefaces, graphic design, illustrations, tables and graphs are all used to make information easier for a reader to process.

The more important the report, the more effort and expense you will put into its design and production. A report given to a client, for instance, will often be professionally printed and bound, and those who create reports regularly will often use desktop publishing software to create a polished, highly professional look.

Communication Technology

When the topic of technology comes up, employers often have a great deal to say about their workers' ability to use computers or create websites. Any communication that is not taking place in a face-to-face conversation will use some kind of tool, and there will be expectations and standards regarding the use of those tools.

> Children learning how to write quickly learn they are responsible for keeping their pencils sharp—but not so sharp they'll tear the paper—and to use #2 pencils on bubblesheets. Business people just as quickly learn to hit reply instead of reply-all when participating in an electronic discussion list.

Electronic Mail and Messaging

The question in business is no longer "do you have email?" Businesses are simply expected to have email systems, and colleagues would be indignant—incredulous—if they were expected to use a less convenient means of contact (Kinsley, 1996). More than 90% of U.S. businesses use email, and more than 70% of business throughout the rest of the world (Davidhizar, Shearer, & Castro, 2000).

Email

Uses of Email

Email is a quick, easy way to send information, keep up to date with projects, or transmit documents. However, email lacks the contextual and non-verbal cues that provide feedback about a reader's emotions or understanding, and it should not be used as a substitute for oral conversation (Conlin, 2002). Email should not be used to send negative, sensitive, or confusing information, or in situations that require negotiation.

> Caution! Business Genre Colliding!
>
> The speed of email makes it possible to hold a sort of electronic "conversation," zapping short questions and answers back and forth (Munter, Rogers, & Rymer, 2003). The requirement for a context paragraph is dropped, and each of the emails makes sense only when reading the entire series of messages, which is often attached. The overall document has been called a "mosaic" message (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992). These conversational emails might also exhibit less concern for spelling or grammar errors, with both parties understand that the genre is "conversation" and not "memo".
>
> This technique avoids the work and repetition of a contextualizing paragraph for each email, but the mosaic can become cumbersome if the email exchange extends too long and a recipient must scroll through many lines of attached text to find the context. Further, if the conversation is later sent to an outsider, misunderstandings can be huge—not to mention the embarrassments of unprofessional spelling, punctuation and language.

Electronic Letters

Companies are increasingly using email to initiate and respond to customer communication, and the letter genre is evolving to accommodate an electronic version. For security and contractual reasons, there will always be a place for the formal, printed letter of acceptance, demand or contract. At the same time, the availability of email and web-based chat has led companies to use email for a variety of external communications.

Email letters require some adjustments to the usual letter format:

Date: The date and email address are already provided in the header and is not included again.

Internal address: On the other hand, an internal address that specifies the full name and title of the recipient is one way to emphasize that the email has been individually written, and is not a "spam"[3] that has been sent to thousands of anonymous customers.

Salutation: A formal salutation line does not appear as part of the memo-styled email header, so that is typically used as the beginning of the email letter. Follow the same salutation rules with respect to proper names, titles and honorifics that you would for a printed letter.

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[3] ***Spam*** refers to the mass emailing of unsolicited advertising, a practice that began right along with the Internet with the first known instance distributed in 1978. The term refers to the annoying repetition of a message, derived from Monty Python's "Spam Sketch" (Templeton, nd), and some states have tried to make the practice illegal.

Signature: An electronic signature is typically typed, although it is possible to scan a signature and insert it in an electronic email. It is also possible to include an image of the company's logo or full letterhead in an email. While these features can create a document that fits more closely into the traditional letter genre, the current level of technology does not guarantee that every recipient will be able to see the signature as it was intended. If the "look" of the letter is important, it might be more effective to send it as an attachment to a short email that simply directs the recipient to open the attached letter.

CC: Courtesy and blind courtesy copies are also indicated as part of the address header, and they should be used with the same attention to privacy and disclosure issues.

> A recent sample of U.S. residents found that a vast majority of adults still are not "very comfortable" with communication over the internet (1999), and many customers will not have a clear expectation of what to expect from an electronic business letter. Even people who have been in business for many years might be unfamiliar with the latest technologies and emerging practices, and perceive all business email as "spam."

Writing skills are "a tiebreaker. If I have two job candidates in front of me, equally qualified except that one can write well and the other can't, I'll hire the one who can—every time." – Paula Goodman, VP and Sr. Recruiter, Citigroup

> Becky Hamann comments...
>
> "Because we have so many different departments, we cannot each be doing our own thing. We all ultimately want to serve the public, and we have to be sure we are all on the same page. E-mail has made it easier to reach each other, particularly when we don't work out of the same location. In our business, we answer to a corporate office in one location, a regional office in another, and we have a branch office that answers to use at another location. It would be easy to work on personal agendas if we didn't have the ability to communicate with each other and stay focused as a team."
>
> Holly Miller comments, "The smallest things, like writing emails in ALL CAPS, can send a huge impression and be a distraction to getting your message across." (Miller, 2005)

Forwarded Email

Generally, an email response will include the original email, and it is common to forward emails along to others for action or comment. This allows a reader to refer easily to the original question. Often an entire series of emails will be forwarded to multiple readers.

Avoid sending unedited text unless there is a reason the recipient needs to see the whole message. Instead, clip what you want to "quote," leaving the > marks at the beginnings of each line so that the reader can easily determine what has been forwarded. The new message is placed at the TOP of the forwarded section, and a message is very seldom forwarded without a contextualizing note to explain why it is being sent

The autosignature can be placed either above the forwarded message or at the very bottom of all messages.

Attachments

One of the great advantages of electronic communication is the ease with images, spreadsheets, video and audio data, and graphical representations can be sent. Unfortunately, businesses do not always have email software, download speed, or server space to handle it all. Unless you have made previous arrangements to send such materials, it is best to avoid graphics, html, and large attachments in your emails. Information too large for a client's or colleague's system, can be set up a website with a link to it in the email message.

> Tip: Never, forward someone else's email without checking to see what's at the very bottom of the message. There could be previously forwarded "old" messages that contain advertising, stupid comments or jokes, or confidential information in people's signatures. People have even been known to ferret out client and vendor relationships by seeing who emailed whom across a chain of forwarded messages. Worst of all, there might be your own incriminating previous emails in the chain! If you do forward someone else's email, check his or her signature carefully for disclaimers or privacy requests and delete any inappropriate information.

Mailing Lists

Most email programs will accommodate shortcuts so that one email can be sent to several addresses at once, and many teams or workgroups will use this feature to facilitate their internal communication. Electronic discussion software is more often used to create permanent electronic discussions among larger groups of people.

E-discussions are used by many organizations to facilitate the quick and complete distribution of ideas, promote problem solving among widely scattered members of the organization, and allow people with similar interests or concerns to network.

- Employees included on the list can be kept informed about a wide variety of topics that pertain to their position or industry.

- Individuals who have questions can post them to the discussion, which might consist of hundreds or even thousands of people scattered all over the world.

- Those who have relevant information are obligated to answer the questions that others ask. Even though a message might be addressed to a specific person, all members of the discussion are expected to contribute.

Most e-discussions are archived, and the messages become part of the organizational knowledge base.

Instant Messaging

Introduced by AOL in 1997, Instant Messaging began as a purely social way to chat over the internet in real time, but has become an important tool of communication for many businesses (Chen, 2003; Crockett, 2001). A company might have its own IM system or simply require that employees subscribe to compatible public systems.

IM allows team members to keep in touch in an electronic version of a workroom. Usually, these are informal, one-on-one meetings, but IM can be used to set up a chat room for a quick meeting as well. Many companies use IM to provide internal or external "help"windows. The technology is especially useful to replace the tiny conversational email messages that clutter up an inbox (Chen, 2003), while marketers find that customers able to use IM at a website are 70% more likely to make a purchase (Bhattacharjee, 2002).

"IM is the most convenient way to consult co-workers and solve a problem quickly" Steven Kramer, *Totality (Bhattacharjee, 2002)*

When IM is used for business purposes, employees typically

- sign on whenever they are on line—generally with an automatic startup script.
- follow office conversation rules—saying hello to each other when first entering and limiting questions and comments to work related issues as they come up.
- use an away script—although this will vary with the degree of time people spend wandering around the office.
- turn off the sounds—both to minimize distracting interruptions and to avoid noise pollution in the office.
- give a heads-up when "leaving" the office—giving team members a chance to ask a last crucial questions. Some software provides a "goodbye" wave to accomplish this purpose.
- are careful about security—unless using a corporate system, IM messages are completely public.
- are careful about image—professionalism on the boss's desktop requires proper spelling, grammar, and tone, although the very common abbreviations are acceptable (cu, brb and so on).

The increasing use of iPods has spread to many offices where personal listening devices can provide some sonic privacy in open office configurations and, some would say, increase employee moral and productivity. The result is that employees also take advantage of the units' communication capabilities, sharing files and sending messages to each other.

Blogs

Although they began largely as vehicles for personal or political expression, businesses quickly adopted blogs as knowledge sharing and customer relationship tools. Microsoft, for instance, sponsors over 800 blogs, where software developers can post the "inside dope" on upcoming products—along with diaries of life in the office and cultural trivia (Conlin & Park, 2004 102). Within just a few years, their effective use is considered a crucial communication tool to gather new ideas, advertise, and gather competitive information (Baker & Green, 2005)

A blog allows U.S. interns at Chinese automaker FAW to keep in touch with their friends and families, and provides a way for other students to become familiar and comfortable with the idea of going oversees themselves (Kellenberger, Jensen, Severson, & Kunwook, 2005). Teams can use blogs to cut down on email and centralize information, and marketers are still learning how much mileage they might get out of the technology.

Companies that use or encourage blogs as part of a marketing strategy have begun to codify some rules but they amount to using basic common sense (Baker & Green, 2005) There's only one rule at Microsoft, and it's an unwritten one: "don't be stupid" (Conlin & Park, 2004). The employee who publishes a blog—either on a personal computer or at the company's—is a representative of the company. Divulging secrets, making untrue claims, or trying to embarrass the boss are just as likely to get a person fired in the blogosphere as they are at the company Christmas party or in a customer's office.

Communicating by Telephone

The number of phone calls increases every year. Even with the advent of email, telephone usage has continued to increase and it remains a primary mode of communication for most businesses. Executives typically spend at least an hour a day on the phone and many spend more (Roever).

Telephone Calls

Phone calls should be short and on topic. An effective caller will often make a list of the items to cover. When expecting a call from someone else, it is polite to have all the files pulled and ready to discuss. Many professionals will maintain regular hours during which they accept calls, leaving voicemail to take calls otherwise.

Voicemail

Including the communication that comes into companies from customers, voicemail accounts for 90% of the telephone communication in business organizations (Davis, Tisdale, & Krapels, 2001). Most telephone extensions in a business office will include some kind of answering technology, whether it is an individualized "voicebox", a general message center for everyone in a department or office, a "rollover" system that re-directs calls automatically to another phone, or a default to a receptionist or answering service.

The ideal message would include all the relevant information and require no follow up, but a call-back is usually needed, so the typical message will provide (in order),

> the callers name, as well as title, company or department if it is not an internal call,
>
> a return phone number and a best time to call,
>
> the topic of the call, and a clear request for information needed in the return call

In all cases, speak slowly and clearly. It is not professional to leave obvious messages that a caller made a call or would like a return call. Voice mail should be used to provide or request as much specific information as possible.

Many companies will provide an automatic outgoing message, but employees who are responsible for creating their own should strive for a short message that provides a clear identification as well as guidance on the best times to call.

> "Hi, you've reached the office of Michaela Huff. I am in the office Monday, Wednesday and Thursday, and I'll return your call the first afternoon I am available.

Many companies expect their employees to change the voicemail regularly to keep the information current. An outgoing message might include a person's schedule for the day or an alternate person to contact for emergencies or specific information (Davis et al., 2001).

Broadcast messages

Broadcast messages are useful for sending information to teams, work groups or a far-flung sales force. The message reaches everyone's telephone at once, in exactly the same words, and can be easier and quicker to create than a written memo or email. Many organizations will have blocks on the telephone system so that only selected people have the ability to broadcast messages to everyone's telephone.

Speaker phones

Speakerphones are used when several people in an office need to sit in on a phone call. Privacy of the caller and productivity of other workers generally limit the use of speaker phones to private offices.

Although the temptation for multitasking is strong, avoid checking voice mail on a speakerphone. The caller should be able to expect a message to be heard only by you, and unless your greeting warns a person that messages are not private, you have an ethical obligation to maintain the privacy of that communication.

Cell phones

Telephone calls made away from the office conform to the same expectations for concise communication, but they introduce a wide range of privacy and politeness issues. Businesslike use of a cell phone includes

- Stepping outside a meeting to take or make a call
- Turning off audible ring tones when participating in any other kind of communication event
- Avoiding loud, cute, long, or embarrassing ring tones

Text messaging offers a similar mode of communication, but functions in quite a different way. Since users are not at their home computers, but away from their desks, the emphasis is less on staying "available" for virtual conversations and more on the immediacy of the message. Users might be in a meeting, for instance, but able to send quick text messages to other meeting participants, or even colleagues who are not at the meeting. The opportunities for private consultations in the middle of a larger public communication can raise a number of ethical and political issues, and it can add a great deal of complexity to the job of a speaker or meeting facilitator (Schrage, 2000).

Fax

Fax machines remain a useful method of sending copies of documents electronically when email or a scanner is unavailable. They are more often used when a faxed signature will meet a situation's legal requirements.

Complete the cover sheet. The information requested only seems useless when the technology works perfectly; when something goes wrong it can save the need for follow-up phone calls or multiple faxes. The recipient needs to know how many pages are supposed to be arriving and how to contact you by phone if there is a problem.

Don't send a fax unannounced. Faxes are generally shared by many people in an office, your message might be sitting in full sight of total strangers if the recipient is not there the pick it up. Further, the machine might be set in an out of the way place where a fax could sit in the tray for days before anyone notices it.

Electronic Meetings

Many large corporations have invested in teleconferencing and videoconferencing equipment to save on the costs and risks of executive travel, according to a poll conducted by the Sony Corporation. Not only do they save travel costs, but the technique speeds up the decision-making process and improves efficiency of operations

Teleconferencing,

Most large companies have telephone systems with the capacity to include multiple internal parties on a phone call, and virtually anyone can use a commercial service to create a conference call.

As long as everyone is meeting at the same time, the general protocol of a meeting remains the same when it is conducted electronically. Participants need to be more careful to articulate their thoughts, as it becomes very difficult to rely on non-verbal communication when meeting participants are not physically together.

All participants should have an agenda of the call ahead of time. If you call the meeting, you are responsible for providing it, and if you are called to a meeting you are responsible for making sure that you have reviewed it *before* the start of the meeting.

Everyone on line should announce her name, title and reason for being included, if that is not obvious from the meeting agenda. As with any meeting, one person is the facilitator.

Even if your group has no "leader" you can't expect people to give and observe the subtle non-verbal conversation clues that govern turns if they can't see each other. It is usually helpful to give your name every time you speak, and if you must leave the room, or return, you should let others know (Adams & Clark 120).

Some people call them virtual meetings, others call them web conferences, or even "webinars", but the basic premise is the same: a group of individuals at separate locations will "meet" together using a combination of telephone and internet technologies to speak, share documents and graphics, and in many cases, create common notes or meeting minutes.

Pay attention. It's easy to get distracted when you're alone in your own office. For the duration of the call, shut your office door, turn off the computer games, and take notes, if necessary, to keep track of who is saying what. Don't use this time to work on other tasks.

Talk to the microphone and strictly control any side conversations at your location. They are unprofessional in any meeting, but they seriously disrupt everyone's ability to hear in a mediated environment.

Make an effort to review the meeting notes verbally, or use electronic methods to have everyone watching a white board or website.

Videoconferenceing

In a very simple setup, a video camera is used to transmit images of the participants at each location, where a speaker phone is set up to catch the conversation.

- Remember that not everyone can see everything. Even with video conferencing, there is often one camera and people in one room see more than others. Try to use verbal cues to supplement the missing non-verbals.
- Although quality of video connections is getting better all the time, much of the information conveyed in facial expressions, which we take for granted in face-to-face conversations, is encoded too quickly (in milliseconds) to be seen in a videoconference (transmitting at about 24 frames per second) People will appear unemotional, unhappy or even deceptive simply because their faces lack "normal" expressiveness. (Adams & Clark, 2001).

> The closer the meeting is to the quality of face to face the better. NCR Worldmark used "'traditional' video conferences to link project partners," but also "desktop video conferencing" to allow smaller groups of people to use small screens on their desktops to see and hear each other "as though they were gathering informally in a colleague's office." NCR went so far as to angle the tables, cameras and screens so the conference tables blended into one "single room" available for colleagues in San Diego, CA and Columbia SC (Lipnack & Stamps, 1997 80-81, 83).

Computer conferencing

With more complex software, multiple users can log on from their own desktops, sharing documents or slides on their own computers or perhaps accessing a common server location. A meeting leader can even control the levels of access and participation available to participants, and individuals might be able to ask private questions, post comments or documents for everyone to see, or utilize a common white board.

Group support systems

Various decision support tools, graphics displays and meeting process management software that can allow groups to engage in their decision-making electronically, and even anonymously.

Asynchronous Meetings

Technologies are sometimes used to allow people to communicate across time as well as space, creating *asynchronous* meetings. A UseNet message board, for instance, could be used by members of a team to communicate on a topic, even though they are working on different shifts of in different time zones. This kind of a setup is more likely to be used for open-ended informal communication, but a team can create a meeting by setting a limited time period in which to exchange messages on a particular topic.

Presentation Media

Contemporary business presentations are usually supported with multiple communication media, ranging from graphics displayed with an overhead projector or a printed handout to computer-generated shows that include images, sound and interactive elements. The choice of technology is often determined by the company or by what is available at the location in which the presentation will be made, but if a tool is available, an effective presenter is one who is able to use its features in a professional and effective way.

Scripts and Notes

Most business presenters speak extemporaneously, but scripts are not rare. New team members are sometimes asked to follow a scripted client presentation, for example, and executive speakers might also want to use exact language for legal reasons, or to insure that live and printed versions of a speech are exactly the same. These technologies can insure consistency, but unless used carefully, they can cause a speaker to appear stilted, remote, or unprepared.

For best use of manuscripts

Memorize and carefully practice the opening and closing lines to insure conversational phrasing and casual gestures during these key moments.

Look at text in the *middle* of each sentence, looking up at the beginnings and ends of sentences and during the pauses between them. (Toogood, 1996 121)

Keep the manuscript out of sight, sliding rather than turning the pages.

When using notes

Format notes as an outline, using large type, lots of white space, and double- or triple-spaced lines, and number the pages.

Include cues for all your media and technology plans on your notes, not merely the text.

Highlight information your audience might ask about, and include notes for the “extra” data, comments, or explanations that you have prepared on those points. .

Flip Charts

Flip charts can be prepared ahead of time or used extemporaneously. Speakers will use this technology as a simple but eye-catching way to preview an agenda or outline, to provide graphics or illustrations, and to include ideas drawn from audience comments.

Plan and prepare professional looking pages in advance. To create the illusion of drawing extemporaneously, use a very light pencil to sketch words or images to be drawn over with markers during the presentation.

Leave a blank page between each prepared sheet, both to create a neutral visual and because most paper is so thin images will show through one page.

If a permanent, visual reminder is desired Tear off the flipchart sheets and use masking tape to fasten them to the walls. Sheets can also be brought back to the next meeting or used as notes for a permanent document.

Whiteboards

White boards are less suitable for advance preparation, but electronic "smart" boards can create a permanent record of drawings or notes made during a meeting or presentation. Some models allow the notes to be printed right from the board to create handouts for the audience.

When using either flip charts or whiteboards, multiple colors should be used for information clarity, systematically matching colors to categories or ideas. Random use of color can confuse an audience.

A speaker should erase a whiteboard appropriately to go along to avoid cluttering the visual field with no-longer-needed ideas.

Overhead Transparencies and Projectors

Overhead transparencies remain the standard method of displaying visuals in many organizations but are often created with computerized graphics programs and color printers to create a highly professional image.

Speakers will hide elements of an image they don't yet want the audience to see with an opaque object, such as a scrap of paper. The effect should appear to be well-planned rather than sloppy.

Colored pens can be used to make extemporaneous additions to the transparency, which can then be washed off and used again.

Presentation Software

Most individuals who make presentations in a business environment will use multimedia resources at least some of the time (Hanke, 1999). To some extent, the influence of the contemporary media culture has simply raised expectations and business audiences have come to expect visual support (Simons, 1999b). Virtually everyone in the business community has PowerPoint software available

(McCracken, 2000; Ricadela, 2000), and a failure to use the tools professionally undermines a presenter's credibility. "Even before you open your mouth," says one speaker, the audience has noticed whether "you whipped the presentation together with whatever time and tools you had handy or that you took the time to craft a unique, professional presentation" (Endicott, 1999a 28).

Another important reason for the increasing sophistication of visual communication is its effectiveness. Even very simple visual aids have been shown to increase the persuasiveness of a speaker, and a moderately talented speaker with visual aids is more effective than a good speaker who has none (Vogel, Dickson, & Lehman, 1986). In fact, as the integration of visuals into presentations becomes more complete, "the better a presenter you are, the more your audience will expect you to use high-quality visual support" (Hanke, 1998 45). This is a generation that is "pre-conditioned" by television, and standards of evidence are influenced by the look and style of broadcast media. Even lawyers have discovered that juries believe material when it "looks like the evening news" (Ganzel, 1999), and politicians know the American public is interested in the images, narrative and personal rapport they have become familiar with in the electronic media (Jamieson, 1998; Slayden & Whillock, 1999).

As a beginner, you might have learned to think about the "visual aids" only as the pictures you show to explain a particularly difficult or technical point. Naïve and unprofessional users of PowerPoint are notorious for showing screen after screen of outline slides, or even using the screen as a huge teleprompter and reading the projected words to the audience! (Fine, 1998 30). This section will define some of the basics of good visual communication as it has developed in the business community, where the design of a presentation generally includes visual elements right from the start.

The specific look and technique of a presentation will vary from organization to organization, and you should try to find out what the best speakers in your new organization are doing. Keeping your own look fresh and exciting is often just a matter of seeing a great looking visual in someone else's presentation and doing something similar in your own. This is not to say that you should use every animation technique at your disposal, but you do need to be at least up to speed with the "look" of presentations in your company or industry, and "custom animations are a great way to differentiate your presentations from your template-imprisoned colleagues" (Terberg, 2000 32).

The simplest and most common presentation technology involves projecting "slides" onto a projection screen directly from a computer (Britz, 1999 A15). More complex presentations involve 35mm slides and sophisticated multimedia productions with video or DVD clips, streaming video or audio, or live connections with camera feeds from other locations.

Professional use of computerized presentation technology involves mastery of the software and equipment as well as a sense of showmanship in front of audiences who have come to expect the professionalism of television personalities.

> The "show" begins as soon as the audience can see the speaker. A blank screen or lens cap should be in place until the display is ready to show the audience.
>
> Audiences used to watching television will expect the projected image to change every couple of minutes (Robbins, 1997 129), but presentations are generally designed to enhance the audience's comprehension. Animation is used to bring in text and chart elements in as they are discussed, allowing at 15-20 seconds for the audience to absorb each piece of information (Robbins, 1997 141).

Keep projected images in view only while you are using them, switching to a blank or neutral screen when the audience should return its attention to the spoken words ("You Have," 1999 A22).

Shut down any programs that will interfere or override the presentation software, including power savers, screen savers, automatic virus checkers, email, and instant messages.

Presentation software is so common that business speakers sometimes think even badly used presentation software is better than nothing at all. In fact, the opposite is true; amateurish slides or an awkward presentation of them will make a speaker look incompetent. In fact, in some industries a "non-PowerPoint presentation—as long as it is well conceived and executed—sets itself apart by virtue of its rarity" (Zielinski, 1999 40).

Dark screen/dark room; light room/light backgound (Jones, 1997)

Words Made Visual

In general, the speaker should provide the words. Now and then a list is useful, especially in a training situation, and you might emphasize a piece of written evidence by illustrating the quotation. Words have very little visual impact, however, and the best integration of ideas and media will show no words at all (Toogood, 1996 138).

"Make every word earn its place on the slide" (Wareham, 2001).

Effective presentation verbals have the look of a billboard or television news graphics rather than the full page, straight lines of a printed memo, report or outline. No fewer than half the visuals should contain some sort of graphic to maintain interest of audience (Hanke, 1998 51). The words that do appear in a multimedia presentation will sometimes function as titles or connectors to other documents being made available to the audience, but they should be formatted as graphics. Numbers will often be the heart of your illustration in a business presentation, but even then, don't display so many numbers people can't read them; if your audience needs all the numbers, give them a hard copy and present only highlights onscreen (Wilder, 1998).

Words used in a "visual form" are more like billboard graphics than an outline.

Showing the audience your speech outline distracts from your presentation.

Visually conceptualizing a relationship helps the audience to understand your point.

Focus Attention on the Speaker

Perhaps the most eloquent use of animation is the integration of the human speaker into the media mix. Badly used animation can distract an audience from the speaker, breaking up the flow of the human interaction and diverting attention with eye-catching motion (Schatz, 1997 35). Animation that is synchronized with the speaker's gestures, the natural left-to-right rhythms of an English-reading audience, and the judicious use of a neutral visual field, however, will bring the focus back to the speaker with each new idea (Toogood, 1996 138; Wareham, 2001).

If using a projection screen, stand to the audience's left (Torok, 1999), making sure not to block the line of sight for everyone in the room Your face should stay completely illuminated, and you will probably find areas you should avoid because of shadows or spotlights (Torok, 1999).

A Word about Sound

A general principle of sensory aids is that "the more senses you connect with during a presentation, the more your audience will remember" (Endicott, 1999b 28). Especially in a training context, it can be important to include tactile and auditory cues to help an audience understand and remember the material they are learning. On the other hand, the sound clips provided in the current versions of presentation software are rudimentary at best. There is a seemingly infinite range of sound files on the web, and some of it is humorous, but very little has any applicability to business. The state of the art today is such that "sound is rarely appropriate in a business presentation" (Wilder, 1999 34), although it will undoubtedly become more important as video clips become a more widely used animation feature.

Even if sound quality of presentation technology improves, the use of sound includes the use of its all-important opposite, silence. We all know that "one picture is worth 1000 words" and "silence is golden." Pauses in an acting performance make the difference between mediocre and great acting (Toogood, 1996 108). Just four to six seconds of silence will focus the attention on you, as an audience waits expectantly for your next words

In presentation slides, avoid animation, blinking or moving text, morphing colors and images, dynamic icons, or sound files.

Control the Flow of Information

Presentation software offers a huge advantage to speakers in its tools for controlling the flow of information the audience receives. Especially when working through a complicated argument or a series of difficult technical points, a speaker will be more effective when he or she can insure that the audience is focused on one idea at a time. The visuality of presentation software is an excellent tool for keeping audience attention, and the many animation tools allow the presentation of controlled amounts of data.

Limit the amount of information.

The basic purpose of most animation is to bring concepts to the audience's attention in the exact order and form needed to make a point. Especially with complex ideas, "listeners need time to absorb what you're telling them" and ideas can be built more clearly by accumulating the information in a controlled way ("You Have," 1999 a17).

Typically, the speaker will advance the slides or builds as he or she speaks about it, never showing the audience a concept or piece of information before reaching it verbally.

Of course, this means that a competent speaker will not load up slides with excessive amounts of information. "One of the biggest mistakes people make is trying to put way too much information on a slide…it's distracting…redundant…and boring" (Marjorie Brody, quoted in Simons, 1999b 38)

Handouts are an excellent way to provide the audience with complete information in the form of a full spreadsheet, table or listing of data. Often, though, a speaker's purposes are better met by calling attention to just one element or point from the data. On the screen, a text box or color highlight can "zoom in" on a particular fact or number, keeping your audiences attention focused on your point rather than reading the handout while you're trying to talk.

With animation, parts of a process can be made to appear and disappear to demonstrate the process (Terberg, 2000).

You can bring in information or ideas one at a time and then fade them so audience remains focused on the current point, using arrows or color to highlight specific items within a process, or repeat images, shapes or words to create repetition and organization (Schatz, 1997 34).

Add animation to add impact or clarity to complicated charts or dense numerical data.

- "A five-year bar chart of steadily increasing earnings is a lot more impressive if each bar glides onto the screen than if the entire chart appears at once" (Fine, 1998).
- "If I'm presenting a graph, for example, I bring it up one layer at a time. First, the X-axis, then the description of what it measures. Then the Y-axis, followed by what it measures, Now, slowly, the trend line, introducing it from left to right. Now a notation on the line, telling what it shows. Finally, of course, a pithy moral or conclusion."   (Wareham, 2001).

Video

Beyond the use of video clips embedded in presentation technologies, many organizations distribute videotapes as a regular communication tool. Executive speeches or training videos can be sent to all corporate locations simultaneously, and videotape allows those who can't be present for a live presentation to view it later.

Videotape can also exploit the potential of storytelling to tap into tacit learning, implicit analysis, and the emotional components of ethical decision-making. Most people in the real world reason by telling and hearing stories (W. R. Fisher, 1984; Peters & Waterman, 1982), and videotaped interviews, dramatic enactments or footage shot on location can assist with that process. The result is more solid understanding than completely verbal, abstracted information (Bruner).

Cue up video segments so that the audience sees only the relevant portions. Don't show an entire scene from a video if the point is made with just a few seconds of footage.

Don't allow the audience to become passive television watchers during a presentation; pause the video to comment on specific scenes or objects.

Communicating with Video

The availability of video has made it convenient and cost-effective for businesses to take advantage of the communication forms normally associated with film and television media. The most common uses of video in a corporate setting include company news/information, internal public relations, newsmagazine shows, and training (Sowa, 2002).

It is possible to simply videotape a presentation and show it to individuals who were unable to be part of the audience. While this can extend the reach of a presentation somewhat, it should be considered an inferior copy of the presentation, rather than a proper use of the video genre. The more professional business video is much more like a television show or short documentary. Videos are generally used as training or sales tools when it is important to demonstrate a procedure or visualize an outcome.

Creating a good video involves telling a good story, requiring attention to issues of compelling plot, realistic characters, and believable scene.

Plot Good storytelling always involves a main character with a problem or conflict, a point of intervention or insight, and a final stage of understanding or success. Typically, a business video is created to show that a product or procedure will "solve" a problem for the viewer. The problem should be compelling and clearly related to the lack of the using the product or targeted behavior. There should be enough tension/drama to engage an audience, and the "story" will demonstrate the positive effect of purchasing the product or performing the procedure correctly. Excessive subplots, unrelated dramatic elements and unclear information should all be avoided.

Characters While a video sometimes features an on or off-camera narrator, a video generally focuses on a single, identifiable main character, who should be representative of the intended audience and realistically drawn. Omniscient narrators, perfect people and multiple characters are difficult for an audience to identify with, and thus less effective in communicating the desired message.

Scene Videos are most often created with a realistic photography style, documenting the action with shots of "real" people in "real" business settings. The video might actually be shot on site, or actors might be used to stage the drama in a created setting. Whatever production methods are used, however, the result should convey a sense of realism. A business video is most effective when viewers can "see themselves" in the same situation.

Take-Withs

Business speakers often provide key facts, statistics, or reference materials in a permanent format (Simons, 1999a), which the audience can "take with" them. Because professional audiences don't typically take extensive notes during a presentation, they expect to be provided with the tools that will allow them to refer to relevant material later on.

Further, a permanent document adds an element of seriousness to the fleeting nature of oral communication, serving as a testimonial record documenting the talk and signifying permanent responsibility for what has been said (Tufte, 1997 69).

Plain paper “handouts” are just one kind of reference; the list of common take-withs includes brochures, bound reports, diskettes, CD’s, laminated reference cards and videocassettes. Obviously, content, production capabilities, costs and utility are all considerations when preparing support materials, and often the simple handout is the most effective tool.

Take-withs should coordinate with, but never duplicate oral or visual elements of the presentation. They should be designed to “elaborate and expand on information” covered in the presentation (Britz, 1999 A18; "You Have," 1999 a18).

Generally, audiences should be discouraged from reading materials thoroughly during the presentation. Only in training situations are handouts typically designed for the audience to use for note-taking or reference during the presentation.

When the audience has full copies of a proposal or report, a speaker might refer to a specific table or image, but should then ask listeners to set the material aside once the point is made.

When a version of the presentation is prepared as a permanent, printed document, it should be formatted as a complete, coherent, stand-alone document {Wilder, 1999 #365}. Full citations should be included for any figures, quotations or graphics, and explanatory text should be added to slides that indicated only bullet points.

If oral explanations or animations are required to understand the handouts, create a video version that includes the speaker’s image and words.

When mixing media, be wary of situations that unnecessarily create redundant information. For example, you should never read a handout or slide to an audience, or provide a handout that is a manuscript of your presentation. Presentation slides, which are good for low-resolution images, should never be substituted for handouts when an audience needs to review and understand complex data relationships (Tufte, 2003), and a speaker who hands out printed copies of the slides his or her slides is just asking for ridicule.

Websites

Business in the contemporary global economy is increasingly conducted by electronic means of communication, and for employees and customers alike, the most important communication is digital. A customer with a problem is likely to make a phone call or visit a website. An employee with a question is likely to send an email. A vendor with a set of product specifications is likely to negotiate prices in an on-line auction.

The electronic era has caused a number of changes in longstanding business genre, and the Internet, an entirely new communication medium, has caused the evolution of at least one completely new genre, the organizational website. This chapter will provide some basic formats and rules to cover the most common forms of electronic communication in the typical business environment: email, telephones, web pages, and video.

For most businesses, doing business in the electronic age means doing business over the Internet. Responsibilities for communication on the web will vary with an employee's industry and position.

A marketing representative uploads product data to a website by updating an interactive database

An accountant provides a web-based newsletter to update clients on changes in tax rules.

Some individuals will be expected to learn and use programming skills to implement complex interactive features, while others will simply update the content of pages that have been designed by specialists. Some people use the Internet exclusively to communicate with customers or others outside the company. At other firms, internal teams will load documents or shared files so that team members can communicate about a project more easily. Whatever his or her job, virtually every employee of a contemporary business should be familiar with the key components of a website and a webpage.

Communicating on the Web

Businesses have embraced the electronic delivery of messages for reasons of speed, cost and convenience, even though research has shown customers might prefer to receive printed material (Smart, Whiting, & DeTienne, 2001). In studies of software and hardware documentation, newer users prefer to get information from a printed manual, while more experienced users are more content to look up their answers on-line, although the result might be due to the generally higher quality of printed documentation and difficulty for new users, especially, to navigate through an electronic document (Smart et al., 2001).

The Website

A website is a location on the Internet that makes information available for public access.[4] A business's website might be used by customers, shareholders, vendors or competitors and each of those users should be able to navigate a path through the interrelated topics displayed to meet his or her own individual information needs (Bolter, 2001 35). The creator of a website must anticipate the users' needs and arrange information with logical associations among topics, as well as provide the path that each type of user will expect to follow to find ideas or data.

There is a huge variety of communication on the web, with individuals, media companies, web portals, auction sites and public agencies all creating their own styles of web presence. At the same time, business websites have begun to take on a predictable "look and feel" that conveys the presumption of business use. In spite of their variety, business websites are most successful when they project the action orientation, value focus, bottom line thinking and sensitivity to the organizational relationships that typify businesslike communication.

Generally speaking, most individuals who work for large organizations do not communicate by way of the public corporate websites that we are familiar with as customers or job-seekers. Those pages

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[4] A website that is protected so that it cannot be accessed except from company employees is called an ***Intranet***.

are designed and maintained by specialists in the corporate communication department. On the other hand, the use of the Internet has become such a widespread part of business that most employees will be asked to contribute material to a department or project team intranet or on-line database.

The Webpage

The website consists of multiple web pages, electronic files that are written in Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML) or displays generated on the fly by Java Server Pages (jsp), Active Server Pages (.asp) or other server-based systems, and read on-line with browser software. Unless you are trained as a website designer or administrator, you will probably not be responsible for any technical aspects of the page's programming. Instead, you will be asked to provide or update content, or perhaps to create a new page following a design template.

When updating or adding to a corporate website, the most basic rule is to follow the rules. Consistency with the rest of the corporate web presence is crucial, including the design's "look and feel" as well as the details of content and format. Even if you are not provided with a template, you should do your best to create a page that matches those that are already on line. In some companies you will simply provide content as a text file to a webmaster; even so, look at similar pages carefully to see that you have provided all the content in an appropriate format and in a businesslike way.

Content

Obviously most of the content issues will relate to the specific information you are providing, but three categories of content generally appear on websites:

Text As with any business communication, the first rule is complete accuracy. Get all the facts right, all the data complete, and all the spelling and grammar perfect (Zuckerman 69). Don't ever forget that several million people can read something on the web, and there must never be anything uploaded that will damage your company's reputation.

Images Images are attractive, but take valuable page and server space. In general, use photographic images only when you need them to provide relevant information (identifying features, for example, or product photos). Provide links to graphics rather than forcing every user to download every photo.

Links Whatever interactive features you decide to include in your page, be sure they all work. Links must connect, navigation buttons must lead a person to the right information—with functioning return links—and perhaps most important of all, all features must work quickly and consistently. You must decide ahead of time where the user might want to go, as well as where you'd like the user to go and "by limiting choices, you can hope to shape the user's experience of your site" (Niederst, 1996 158).

> Text links are preferable to graphics-only links. Search engines can't follow graphics-only links, and blind users cannot easily use accommodative software if text titles or link information are not provided (Sasso, 2001).

Format

The format of websites will vary, but businesslike pages are typically quite simple. A fundamental principle of good design is that people shouldn't notice the design. If the user must spend time watching (and waiting for) cool graphics or fancy interfaces, it isn't a particularly efficient or businesslike page. As you might expect, the fundamental message aspects of the communication include the basic elements of defining the context, providing information, and creating possible action.

Define the context

The visual look of the page orients the user to its purpose. A business page generally includes a company logo, of course, but the design of the page should also convey the business's "culture" and purpose.

- Pages designed to deliver information should help the user find it and get to it as quickly as possible.
- An e-commerce page should facilitate a user's decision-making steps (Adams & Clark, 2001 215).
- A home page defines the context for a whole site, typically offering navigational links and giving categories of data available.

The company logo will appear on every page of the website, perhaps with some contact information, and often with a working link back to the company's "home" page. Usually at the bottom of the page, users expect to see the full company name, a copyright date that indicates when the information was uploaded to the web, an email contact for the website administrator, and any other "fine print" that might be pertinent to the document.

> Your page must be "located" within the website in such a way that users can find it, even from multiple directions. It is often the page creator's responsibility to let the website administrator know all of the pages that should "link" to the new document.

A title should appear near the top of any webpage. Business users are not surfing; a typical user will take only a second to decide whether the page meets his or her needs, and will be gone inside of seven seconds if the navigation hasn't taken her to where she wants to be (Bailey, 2001). The title should match any links, descriptors, or keywords that might have linked a user to this page. Even so, a user arriving at your page from search engine results should be able to determine exactly what it contains.

Provide the information

The basic purpose of the message does not change when the business communicator goes on line, but the expectations of the Internet user are somewhat more requiring than the reader of a document.

Attractive With complete freedom to use color, shapes, graphics and images, the writer of a web document is expected to provide information that is distinctive and attractive (Niederst, 1996).

Organized Organize your data in user-friendly groupings and use headers, sub-headers and links to help the user find the information he or she needs quickly. Use a consistent "keyword" vocabulary to facilitate on-site and off-site search engines.

Complete The magic of the web is that you can provide infinite layers of information to further explain, supplement or support your text. Business users will be familiar with the conventions of a business reports and expect links to direct them to documents that resemble appendices, citations, and supporting data.

Most corporate websites "mimic the structure of the bureaucracy producing the design rather than complement the information presented" [Edward Tufte quoted in\Martin, 1997 #4372 276]

Action

Some websites are designed to be persuasive, encouraging a user to click on an icon to purchase, donate or participate. For many websites, the action step is to drill down for additional, more specific, or background information. A large part of creating an effective web document involves creating an easy interface for the user to take whatever action is appropriate.

Navigation refers to the elements of the page that help a user get to the next action or piece of information. Whatever navigational or organizing principles are used on the rest of the website should be used for your document. If the rest of the pages provide frames or scroll bars, for instance, your page should do the same, even if the feature is not quite perfect for your specific information. Users should find a consistent system on every page of the website.

> A navigation bar, usually at the top or left hand side of the page, will allow a user to move from your page to other documents on the website. It also serves as a "map" to the website as a whole, indicating how the page relates to the rest of the information included on the site.

Think about what kinds of decisions your user is making and the path he or she might need to take to accomplish the desire action. Often, your page should offer a return "home" or perhaps to an intermediate page. Any links on the page should be carefully thought out so that the information at that link "makes sense" in the context of your document. Users assume that the information "under" the link somehow explains it (Bolter, 2001 38), and you should see that it makes sense from that perspective.

Links are the tool of navigation, and wherever they lead, they must be in working order. You should never upload a page without verifying that all the links work, of course, but pages for which you are responsible should be reviewed periodically to insure that everything is still in working order.

Interactivity Invite user interaction with menus, forms, buttons, check boxes [Liechty & Enrod, AJC 5.1] Make interaction simple, using consistent color, placement, and order throughout the website. Use the formats commonly found on business websites, with navigation buttons typically placed across the top or down the left side, never at the bottom of the page, in a frame, or in random spots. Search boxes should be located at the top of the page.

"Electronic documents provide none of the physical cues we take for granted in assessing information" (Lynch & Horton, 2002 30) and a user could have hyperlinked from anywhere. "Web pages need to give the user explicit cues to the content and organization of information because only a small portion of any site (less than a page) is visible at any one time (Lynch & Horton, 2002 31).

Online File Management

Information can also be made available on-line as word-processed documents, spreadsheets, digital photos, or databases. You could be asked to provide information for a website in virtually any electronic format. If you are asked to provide files for use online, ask for your company's protocols for file names, directory structure, file size or photo format, and *follow* them.

"Documents written to be read online must be concise and structured for scanning…. Use headings, lists, and typographical emphasis for words or sections you wish to highlight" (Lynch & Horton, 2002 144).

Ultimately, the appearance of a web document is determined by the viewer's browser capabilities and settings. Businesses try to keep their web documents simple enough that any customer or colleague will see them as clear, crisp documents. Too much graphic complexity means a user with customized settings might not even be able to understand your information (Lakowski, 1999; Niederst, 1996).

> If you must insure that a user views or prints a document *exactly* as designed, use document format software (i.e. Adobe Acrobat) or put the original document or spreadsheet on the server for the user to download.

Whatever you place on your website should be viewable quickly and easily without scrolling. Your page should load quickly with the most important information and navigation elements immediately in sight.

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