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# How To Avoid Multiple Communication Channels Clogging True Communication

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Could this cause a miscommunication? FIRMBEE-COM-UNSPLASH

By Dianna Booher—

Standing stark naked, I started to place my phone on the bathroom counter nearby before stepping into the shower. Just as I put the phone down, it rang. I reached back to grab it, thinking my ill dad needed me to make a quick dash to the ER. Startled, once I saw that it was a Facetime call, I felt the phone slide through my fingers like slippery soap and land on the floor.

Yes, I did have enough sense about me at the moment to grab a robe before answering the number I didn't recognize. "You're facetimeing me! Did you realize that? It's 6:30 a.m."

"So sorry." Click. The client sounded as surprised and embarrassed as I felt. He didn't call me back for another two weeks—a typical voice call during regular business hours.

Although the most embarrassing communication mistake, it's certainly not the only one I've been party to when someone's juggling too many channels: email threads, text threads, instant messaging, Slack, What's App, Facebook Messenger.

To be more specific about such communication mishaps:

--My brokerage firm mailed a quarterly financial statement to me—a statement belonging to another client!

--A very sexually explicit text came from an unknown phone number. I replied, "You've sent this to the wrong person." The return text said, "So sorry—that was meant for my husband."

--A family member texted an insulting comment—quickly followed by a second text saying, "Oooooops. Wrong thread."

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--An impatient journalist sent me a LinkedIn message inviting me to schedule an interview “ASAP,” but which I got around to reading a month later.

--Laughing at myself just now, I sent a text yesterday to a colleague, saying: “Please check your email. Complicated situation. Too much to text.”

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All these tools are meant to make communication easier and quicker—but channel overload often does just the opposite.

## Here’s What Can Go Wrong

**Clarity:** Quite often during a fast-moving situation, you and a colleague (or several colleagues) find yourself using two channels at once—email and text. With the same situation, you as the recipient have to keep tabs on the timeline. You’re caught seeing two contradictory messages.

The text says: “Sean Hall has decided to go ahead with the project if we can start it today.”

The next instant-message you see says: “Stop work. Sean has changed his mind because we can’t guarantee the work will be

started today.”

Then you check your email only to read: “Can you call the manager of the service department to see if she’ll work Sean into today’s schedule?”

Contradictory messages? What’s the current state of affairs? Is the project moving ahead or not? You’ll have to go back to each message and check the timelines to determine what, if anything, has been “overcome by events.”

**Delays:** If you have time-sensitive messages, be sure you’re sending and responding in the channel that your recipient uses most often. It’s disappointing—and sometimes costly—to find an invitation sitting in your account for an event that’s already passed.

**Mistakes:** Deletions, exceptions, deadlines all provide fodder for frequent miscommunication. You receive an email saying, “Our Hile proposal has been approved as submitted. You’re now free to destroy all the preliminary drafts of research that have been done over the past 6 months.”

So you delete all the related worksheets—only to see a Slack message at the end of the day saying this: “One exception to the earlier note about the Hile proposal: Please retain the worksheets involving cost calculations of the alternatives.”

**Distance:** Rapport builds slower when so many people work remotely and communicate virtually. Having 17 people join on a ZOOM call does not create instant camaraderie among the participants like a face-to-face meeting when people arrive early and stay late to chat.

A warm handshake or even an “Hey, hope you had a nice trip to Okinawa. I heard Caleb say you went there on business. New effort

or what?” Just a “Hi, Ginny” on a live call breaks the ice far more than joining a video “meeting” with a couple dozen other unknowns.

So, where do we go from here? It’s not realistic to think all the channels and apps are going to shut down or unclog themselves.

## Here’s How to Navigate Communication Channels Safely

- Select your preferred channel and let colleagues know your preference.
- Respond in the same channel people use to contact you.
- Avoid sending multiple messages in different channels, as if you’re attempting to “hunt the other person down.”
- Consolidate critical steps and messages arriving from different channels into your CRM. (If you need to review what’s been said back and forth on a matter, your CRM system will likely have saved only email exchanges. If critical comments/steps/precautions arrive in different channels, you’ll need to cut and paste them into the CRM history if you want a complete record of what has transpired.)
- Learn the expectations for responsiveness. (In some organizations, you’re expected to respond to email within an hour or two. In other cultures, 24-48 hours for a response is acceptable. Ask what the expectations are. If you’re the leader, set and clarify the expectations.
- Assume the person you’re communicating with “hears” your body language even when they can’t see you. (Your body language most always “comes through” in your tone of voice

—even on a voice call. If you slouch in your chair, your voice will sound inattentive and weak.)

- Adapt your volume, tone, and manner for the channel and recipient. (“TY for info. R U open for dinner?” is fine for texting—but not for business emails.)

Staying on top of all these channels can make you feel like an air-traffic controller. Granted, staying alert and keeping everyone in their own “lane” may not be a life-or-death situation. But knowing what to say, where to say it, and how to say it can prevent communication mishaps that can crash a client project—or your career.

Dianna Booher is the bestselling author of 50 books, including *Communicate Like a Leader*. She helps organizations communicate clearly and individuals increase influence with a strong personal presence.

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