

On the other hand, among the 65 professionals he works with, "e-mail is hardly ever misinterpreted." Having used it extensively for the past 4 years, he offers these "things-I-have-learned":

- 1) E-mail is replete with pitfalls.
 - 2) Never e-mail bad news.
 - 3) Never e-mail criticism in any form.
 - 4) Use e-mail to reach people who are hard to reach by phone (otherwise, call them).
 - 5) Use e-mail primarily to facilitate face-to-face meetings.
 - 6) If possible, do not enclose attachments. Send a photocopy.
 - 7) Forget "emoticons" [e.g. :) or :(-- they express sentiments pictorially]. They take too much time to figure out, & I hate turning my head to the side.
- "E-mail is a lousy form of communication for some situations, nay many situations. It is not a substitute for personal contact. If there is a need to convey something that is delicate, or something that can be misunderstood by the nature of written or printed words, turn away from the computer & pick up the phone.

"Even if it involves calling more than one person, the phone is still a usable, effective, efficient means of communicating. With the phone, or face-to-face, you know if your message is received in the proper spirit. You also know that the person or persons you communicated with are more than just an e-mail address -- they are people, just as deserving of your personal attention as they are your e-mail attention." -- Mark Zeug

THE COMPUTER CONUNDRUM: IT'S ALL OUT OF SIGHT

If you're away, does anyone monitor your e-mail? If you get a fax or FedEx, chances are better someone else will catch it for you -- since it is a physical object. This assumes there is someone else -- an assistant, colleague or secretary -- looking out for you.

If you're very busy, will you know or care you've received e-mail? Again, the physical object rule: a fax, FedEx, even memo placed on your desk or chair, or in your in basket, or shoved in your face, may fare better.

Unless people are actively seeking info about your org'n or product, why would they visit your website? Does Herb Schmertz' rule for sponsored tv shows apply: it costs at least as much to promote them as to mount them?

RESOLUTION: Until computers become our third arms, a habit of living, there'll still be many times when they are not effective for communication.

Until this either does/doesn't occur, practitioners are stuck counting heads. What percentage of key stakeholder groups, and at what level of opinion leadership, truly have the computer habit?

But there's a problem: how to get this data? This may be a major reason for audience research for the next several years.

A REASONABLY BALANCED VIEW OF ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION

Many practitioners say they haven't had such fun in years as playing with the new computer toys. Others hope it will bring back the days of mass communication. Of course, some also hate hi tech, for a variety of reasons. Here are pros & cons of the various methods available -- to help answer the question whether pr should be devoting so much effort & energy to this area.

E-MAIL **Pro:** • Great for people in separated sites.

- It's quick; you can send & receive immediate responses (assuming the receiver quickly accesses his/her e-mail).
- One message can be sent to many.
- Even knowing all the cons (below) & that it's 1-way communication, "I love e-mail. It's an incredible time saver. I can type it once & send it to many. And it's very inexpensive. What would it cost to call 50 people? It's more cost effective to e-mail them...& easier," Carol Wolicki of Chrysalis Communications (Bolton, Mass) told prr.

- "It's still new, still novel."

Con: • Fax gets thru as fast, maybe gets more attention, is a visual record to work from (tho e-mail can be printed out).

- You can quickly become swamped. "I get 80-90 e-mail messages a day. At some point you just say, I can't read all this," says Wolicki, who was using hi tech before most practitioners had a computer.
- Because these messages are done quickly they tend to be emotive. "Be patient, especially if you're going to blast somebody. E-mail tends to be something that people trip off quickly & regret later. Sit & think."
- Another hazard of their quick nature is the ease with which they can be missent. Different e-mail programs have different directories. It's easy to mislabel a message & send it to someone else because it's all done so quickly.
- Once an e-mail message is sent, you lose control of it. There is no privacy. "The federal gov't has ruled that e-mail is not like regular mail. You wouldn't open & read a letter that was missent to you. But if it's an e-mail, you can open it &, not only that, your company owns



the rights to it & can read it," even send it to others. There are people whose job it is to go in & recoup old e-mail messages you thought you deleted.

- It's a limited market. Only about 10% of your world is online. "We don't know how crazy it's going to get as it grows. It may get completely out of hand."
- There is a learning curve to using e-mail; it's not intuitive yet, notes Wolicki.

NETWORKS

Pro: • Thousands of PCs in org'ns have been connected into LANs (local area networks) allowing people to easily send e-mail to anyone else on the network.

- Benefits include sharing common databases, client records, etc. Distant LANs can be connected to form WANs (wide area networks) as tho all were in the same building.
- It offers a level of sophistication that allows you to save the cost of having multiple printers, multiple hard drives. It saves money & time (fighting about who gets to use the resources).
- To be competitive & because they're easier, more people are buying networks, explains Wolicki.

Con: • It costs money because someone has to maintain it. And when the network goes down, everything comes to a halt.

- Wouldn't walking down the hall for a face-to-face be more effective?
- A network is only as good as the things you have on it. It's an infrastructure.

DATA STORAGE

Pro: • Saves paper, space & is often more usable & retrievable than that old bugaboo, filing. Especially with a scanner.

Con: • You have to know how to file it so you can retrieve it.

And some things aren't easily saved -- art work, slides which need to be carefully scanned in. Again the technology issue -- you have to have a certain level of sophistication to be able to do this.

There are **data base** programs & **info base** programs. Data base uses fields which require the entry of specific info into a specific field. An info base allows you to put any info into a giant space. Then you can search using key words.

DATA GATHERING

Pro: • "There are so many online services & capabilities. It gets easier the more technologically savvy you get. **Con:** By the same token, you can find a lot of junk." Much data is from media sources & thus often inaccurate.

WWW

- Does a visit to a website give someone more "experience" of the sponsor than reading an ad or annual report, using its products etc? Or does it require face-to-face to attain this?
- 77% of US companies are now or plan to be on the Net within 2 yrs, reports a survey by Straightline International (NYC). 38% already have internet sites. Info that is or will be provided includes: corp news (84%); gen'l fin'l info (80%); product/svc info (61%); customer support/educational info (37%); employment listings (33%). 58% have e-mail addresses. Only 16% use their sites to capture data such as names & addresses of users accessing info. "It is unfortunate that more major companies aren't building databases of site visitors to help identify whom to provide information for & how the sites should evolve," notes Michael Watras, CEO.
- Internet IR efforts: 58% make their entire AR accessible on their net sites. Some only make portions of their AR available: Letter to Shareholders (54%); 10K & 10Q (38%); Review of Operations (36%); full financial reporting (32%) & graphs or photos (28%). When asked if ARs would ever be available only in electronic form, 59% said "no," 26% thought they would eventually, 16% didn't know.

CASE TO TEST COMPUTER COMMUNICATIONS' HARD CORE VALUE

You're being boycotted, customers aren't buying, employees are restive, shareholders/stakeholders are angry. You have all these marvelous electronic communications channels. Do they make a difference -- give you an advantage you don't now have?

Pros are: Can reach some publics immediately, but is it faster? Is it more believable? Will people retrieve it from their computers -- are they logged in, looking? Even systems that freeze the screen when messages arrive can make people angry by interrupting them etc.

When print, then telephones, then broadcasting appeared, the fear was they would destroy humankind's social nature. What really happened was "hi tech, hi touch." **Will this be different?**

"CAN WE INFLUENCE THE TONE OF OUR E-MAIL MESSAGES?"

... asked a reader (pr 12/18/95). Among those responding are 2 from Hawaii -- whose remote location could make e-mail particularly valuable:

- "One can never be sure that e-mail messages are received in the spirit of one's intent," writes Craig Miyamoto, evp, Professional Communications. He relates his experience as mediator for college students who e-mailed each other during their work in student professional org'ns:

"Whenever constructive criticisms or well-intended suggestions were e-mailed, it was not surprising that although no offense was intended 99% of the time, offense was taken at least 90% of the time."