

# How Today's Preference for Texts and Emails Is Changing Phone Call Etiquette

By Siri Hedreen, business.com writer | Sep 01, 2019

## Among younger workers, text-based communication is less fearsome and more efficient.

Who among us doesn't feel a Pavlovian surge of panic upon hearing the opening notes of their ringtone, followed by an awesome wave of relief when the stranger next to them picks up their phone?

Baby boomers, apparently. A 2019 survey of U.K. office workers reported that 76% of millennials experience anxiety about speaking on the phone, compared to 40% of baby boomers. The result is a clunky mismatch between communication expectations among colleagues and clients.

## Telephonophobia

"Even as a child I was never big into using the telephone," said Will Manuel, president and CEO of Core Mobile Apps. "My parents had rigorous rules around receiving calls from friends. That has [extended] into my adult life where I feel some anxiety toward having to be prepared to speak to anyone."

Manuel's avoidance of phone conversation, however, ended up working to his advantage – he found the alternatives were working far more seamlessly. "I've automated a lot of the communication tasks and follow-up sequences in my business that once used to yield phone calls," he said. "This requires me to be on the phone less and actually gain more productivity and efficiency in the process."

Thus, our gradual shift toward text-based communication has formed a feedback loop – instant messaging has spawned a generation inexperienced with phone calls, inexperience leads to anxiety and avoidance, and that avoidance has led to more and more innovative ways to get around talking on the phone in business.

## Cutting the phone line

Anxiety is not the only factor, however. Globalization, the internet and the rise of remote work mean colleagues can collaborate long distance, and clients can be anywhere on the globe – the sun never sets on the 21st-century office. Expecting people to pick up the phone is no longer practical.

"We have several remote team members in different time zones, so using text communication works better," said Becky Beach, blogger and developer for Verizon. Beach and her colleagues rarely make internal phone calls; instead, they use Slack to communicate.

Changes in the physical workplace are also working in concert to make phone conversation as difficult as possible. As of last year, only 40% of U.S. households had operational landlines – down from 90% in 2004 – as they're steadily displaced by mobile phones. Many businesses are also opting to eliminate this redundancy. The problem is that compared with a landline, cell coverage is still spotty – a rare instance of a technology inferior to what it was 50 years ago. Add to that the advent of the open office, where overheard telephone conversations are both awkward for the caller and distracting for everyone around them, and it's clear that phone communication is no longer functional for the working world.

## Efficient messaging

There are plenty still perfectly capable of phone conversation, or at least willing to put up with the discomfort – it's the inefficiency of phone calls that's the problem.

"Phone calls require 100% attention, which today's employee can't afford to give. We need to multitask to get things done," Beach said. "If I were on calls all day, I would get less work finished!"

The norms have also changed. Clients or prospective clients may find phone calls invasive or presumptuous, often forcing them to make decisions on the spot. And unlike a succinct email, it's a lot of superfluous noise for every piece of information conveyed.

"If someone asks a question [over the phone] and you don't know the answer, you feel like you have to

fill that silence," said Shayne Sherman, CEO of TechLoris. "If the question comes via IM, you can take the time to find the answer without feeling like you need to fill the time with platitudes."

And unlike phone calls, emails leave a (digital) paper trail. Speaking on the evolving modes of business communication, Sherman said, "Honestly, the only change is that I don't find myself asking or being asked the same questions over and over again. It's really easy to think while you're on the phone that you'll remember what was said by the time you are able to write it down ... Now, you have a written record."

### **Navigating channels of communication**

While communication with colleagues is always subject to office norms, with today's fetishization of efficiency, text-based communication is taking over – much of which can be owed to the rapid growth of Slack. By some accounts, Slack dealings are even infiltrating the home.

As a result, telephones are now seen as a last resort.

"The only time a phone call is really necessary is when you require an immediate answer and you haven't gotten one through other mediums," said Sherman. "Other than that, chat and email are always acceptable."

In communicating with clients, however, there's more than efficiency at stake. Trust and credibility must be earned, and in this regard, tone is important. As a result, many defer modes of communications to the preferences of the client.

Still, it's good to have some hard and fast rules when initiating conversation. "In my opinion, the first initial introduction to your client should be met with a phone call and a follow up with a voice message," said Lisamarie Monaco, business owner and independent insurance agent. "Once you have established this, moving forward could be text messaging as needed."

There are times when phone calls provide a nice customer service touch – as long as the customer is in the right mindset. Otherwise, it's usually seen as an annoyance.

"Ideally, the correct time to approach a customer is within five minutes of receiving that lead as that is the time when the customer is exploring your website and thinking about your products," said Sakshi Gupta, marketing manager and leads specialist at Coirfit Mattress. "We have set this as a fixed parameter for our customer database."

After that five minutes, communications are only initiated through Whatsapp, email or text message, Gupta said, allowing customers to respond in their own time. "All it takes is a simple message, and the customers reply when they have free time and are all set to have this conversation."