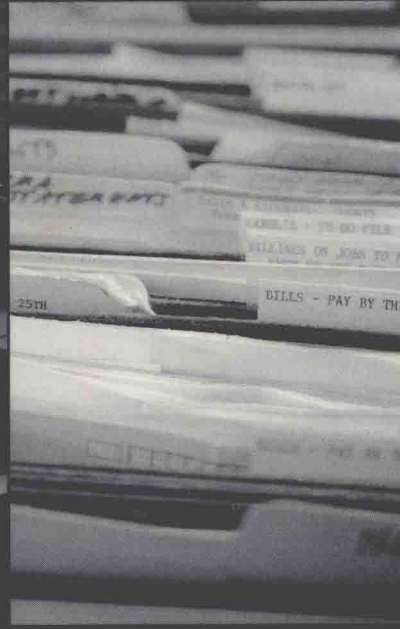# ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Management Communication Program

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With material taken from

Writing & Speaking at Work:
A Practical Guide for Business Communications, Second Edition
by Edward P. Bailey

Business and Management Communication: A Guide Book, Fourth Edition
by Ritch Sorenson, Grace DeBord and Ida Ramirez

Excellence in Business Communications, Fifth Edition
by John V. Thill and Courtland L. Bovée

Guide to Presentations
by Mary Munter and Lynn Russell

Technical Communication in the Global Community, Second Edition
by Deborah C. Andrews

Contents

Business and Management Communication: A Guide Book
Fourth Edition

Ritch Sorenson **Grace DeBord** **Ida Ramirez**

CHAPTER 2

Designing Communication Strategies

After a long series of meetings, a management team selected a new insurance package for its employees—one that was clearly an improvement over the existing package. The team distributed a memo informing employees of the change and asking for a vote of approval.

Shortly thereafter, angry employees assembled to demand that the company retain the old package. The management team was shocked. After inquiring, the managers found that a climate of distrust had developed when the employees heard of the meetings without knowing exactly what was being discussed. The office was filled with rumors, and when the memo was released, too little information was provided for the employees to judge the new package on its own merits. Therefore, the employees read more into the changes than actually existed.

The management team then spent several days meeting with groups and individuals to explain the changes. After a considerable delay, and a tremendous amount of communication, the employees accepted the new plan.

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│                  Develop Your Communication Strategy                  │
│                                                                       │
│              Establish an objective for your communication.           │
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│                                   ▼                                   │
│                 Identify and analyze your target audience.            │
│                                   │                                   │
│                                   ▼                                   │
│            Choose communication channels to meet your objectives.     │
│                                   │                                   │
│                                   ▼                                   │
│                   Create and communicate the message.                 │
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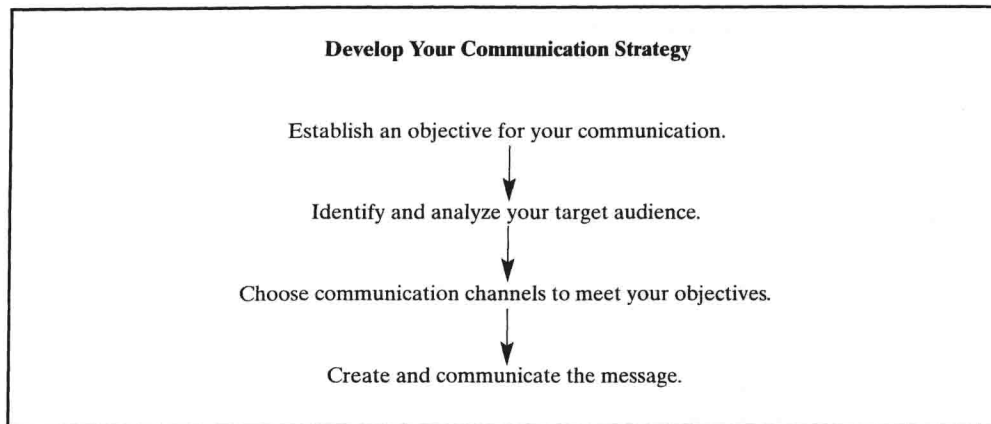
FIGURE 2.1 Steps in Developing a Communication Strategy

The management team learned that time devoted to developing a strategic communication plan to introduce the changes could have eliminated many of their problems. This chapter provides guidelines for developing a communication strategy. We suggest that, before you communicate, you should (1) establish your communication objectives, (2) identify and analyze your audience, (3) choose communication channels that best meet your objectives, and *finally*, (4) create and communicate your message (see Figure 2.1).

ESTABLISH COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVES

Communication objectives are designed to help managers achieve organizational goals. Organizational goals consist of general management objectives, such as expanding market share, and specific unit objectives, such as increasing the number of cutomer sales contacts. A communication objective clarifies what a manager hopes to accomplish through communicating. When the objective is clear, a manager is in the best position to choose the appropriate method of communication.

When forming a communication objective, you should pinpoint what you want the audience to know or do by forming a sentence similar to the following:

At the conclusion of our communication, my audience will know or be able to . . .
As a result of this communication, my audience will . . .

The following provides some examples of communication objectives that a manager might create in order to achieve management objectives.

As a result of this communication,
my employees will agree to work overtime.
upper management will agree to purchase new computing equipment for my
field staff.
my employees will better understand unit objectives.
members of my unit will know specifically how to close a sale.

Notice that, in these examples, we *do not suggest a communication method.* We recommend that you *form the communication objective before you specify how you'll communicate.* Too often, managers focus on the method of communication instead of the desired outcome. In the example at the beginning of this chapter, the managers focused on the communication method—using a memo to distribute information—instead of the desired outcome—acceptance of the insurance package. Before you choose your communication method and design your message, you need to consider the needs of your audience.

IDENTIFY AND ANALYZE YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE

After you've defined your objectives, identify your target audience. Then, consider the characteristics and concerns of your audience. Finally, adapt your communication method to the audience.

Identify Your Target Audience
In an organization, choosing the right people with whom to communicate is extremely important. You may inadvertently overlook individuals who should receive your message and, as a result, create organizational or political problems. You may choose to communicate with the wrong person and limit the likelihood of achieving your objectives.

For example, one young supervisor felt that his employees deserved better work facilities. He sent a strongly worded memo to his employees, his manager, and the CEO. The CEO was perplexed when he got the memo and called the manager to ask what it was about. The manager said she had just received the memo and that it was news to her as well. The CEO was angry that the manager didn't know the concerns of her subordinates and that he was receiving memos about issues that she should handle. "You had better get your unit under control," he said. The manager was embarrassed and was very angry that her subordinate had sent this memo without consulting her first. The young supervisor was surprised to see the furor that a simple, well-intentioned memo could create.

The young supervisor in the previous example needed help in knowing how to go about communicating to achieve his objectives. Here are four ways you can learn *how to communicate* and *with whom to communicate* in your organization.

Consult with your manager. Because managers have more experience and a broader view than subordinates, they are in a position to know with whom you need to communicate in order to achieve your objectives. In the previous example, if the supervisor had consulted the manager, she could've helped him frame the request in an appropriate manner and could've advised him about how to guide requests through organizational channels.

Seek advice from a mentor. A mentor is someone with experience, preferably in your organization, who can guide you in forming communication strategies for achieving organizational goals.

Seek input from the organizational "grapevine." The "grapevine" consists of all the informal channels of communication in the organization. Most communication in organizations occurs informally. Sources who are connected in the organizational grapevine can help you to know about key players in the organization and how you might communicate with these people in order to accomplish your objectives. Seek to know the following:

- **Key decision-makers.** Besides the CEO, there are other influential people in the organization—usually in formal positions of authority. Find out who they are, the nature of their influence, and whether you'll need their approval to achieve your objectives.

- **Gatekeepers.** Formal and informal "gatekeepers" control the flow of communication. Managers are *formal gatekeepers* who control whether communication flows upward from subordinates or downward from upper management. If you want your formal message to make it to upper management, you need to make it acceptable to your manager. *Informal gatekeepers* are central individuals in the organizational grapevine. They can be good sources of information. You'll be better able to accomplish your goals when you can get informal information from these gatekeepers.

- **Informal Leaders.** Every group and organization has informal leaders. These are usually employees who are well liked, expert, and trustworthy. Informal leaders can provide insight into employee attitudes. To achieve some of your objectives, you may need to either get support from, or be prepared to rebut arguments presented by, informal leaders.

Use organizational norms and standard procedures. Organizations develop a set of norms or standard procedures that are used to handle repetitive organizational issues. Some standard procedures are written and include information on whom to contact about various organizational concerns. Many of these norms or standard procedures are not written, but they still guide organizational conduct. Sometimes, you may have to ask other employees for that type of information. In the previous example, the supervisor could've asked another supervisor about norms and procedures, for example, "How do I go about getting more facilities for my workers?"

After you have consulted your sources, you may find that you should send a memo to only one person. Or, you may find that you need to communicate with many people, using a variety of communication channels. For example, when promoting change in an

organization, you may need to engage in a *communication campaign*—a promotional campaign similar to those used by political candidates. You may begin by discussing your proposal with your immediate manager and gathering information from informal gatekeepers. When you have a well-developed argument, you may then make an initial proposal to a key decision-maker, and finally make a formal presentation, accompanied with a hard copy summary, to a top management group. When the proposal is approved, you may need to make an oral presentation, with an accompanying written report, to all employees.

As you plan your communication strategy, consider that your communication may involve both *the initial audience* and *the ultimate audience*. Your initial communication may be to only one person. For example, your initial proposal may be to your manager in the form of a memo report. However, if your manager believes that your proposal has merit, he or she may pass the memo on to other upper-level managers. Upper-level management may, in turn, show it to the board of directors and other employees. Thus, as you plan your communication, keep in mind both the initial and ultimate audiences.

Analyze and Adapt to Your Target Audience

If you want your communication to be successful, you need to understand the knowledge, interests, and attitudes of your audience. The relatively little effort you spend analyzing your audience can be returned to you many times over as you find that your communication succeeds. The following provides some guidelines for analyzing and adapting to your audience.

Appropriate communication adapts to the audience's interests and concerns and adjusts to its background and level of knowledge. In addition, for business communicators, appropriate communication should normally get quickly to the point and clearly communicate the message. The purpose of appropriateness is to communicate so that your target audience understands and responds favorably to your message.

Sources of Information

Depending on your target audience, you can gather information on its interests and backgrounds from different sources.

Groups external to your business. Businesses communicate externally for a variety of reasons. They provide reports to stockholders, advertisements to prospective customers, contracts to suppliers, and product information to customers. Sometimes, organizations use surveys and individual, or focus group, interviews to gather information. Your goal is to identify the predominant values, interests, and knowledge level of the target audience.

You may be able to infer the characteristics of an external group by reviewing demographics. For example, if your audience is college students, you can probably assume that saving money and time is a big priority for them and that they place a premium on their leisure-time activities. If you're writing a sales letter to college students, you could focus on how your product or service saves time and money, and thus frees up more of both for outside activities.

Your business and groups within your business. Your business will have overall goals and objectives. It will also have an organizational culture that includes norms, values, and ways of doing things. In addition, subgroups within your

business will have their own goals and subcultures. For example, production departments tend to have structured and pragmatic cultures designed to meet production goals, while research departments tend to have professional cultures that allow for independent analysis and discovery. Thus, you may infer some characteristics of your audience from departmental tasks and organizational roles.

Information obtained from the organizational grapevine, gatekeepers, and informal leaders can help you further define the goals and cultures of your business and groups within the business. In some cases, you may be able to conduct surveys of organizational members. Use these sources to identify the values, interests, knowledge, and concerns of the larger organization and relevant subgroups.

Individuals. Identify values, biases, and attitudes of key individuals within your audience. You can gather information about individuals from the grapevine, information gatekeepers, and by interviews with the individuals themselves. Is the individual a computer whiz or a technophobe? Does he or she value relationships, or is the bottom-line the main focus? Is he or she a straightforward, tell-it-like-it-is type, or one who prefers a more roundabout approach?

Identify the individual's characteristics and opinions so that you can present your message in a way that he or she will understand and view positively. For example, words have different *implied* meanings to different people. To some people, *organizational control* means a positive move to accomplish goals, while to others, it means the stripping away of individuality and choice.

Types of Information to Gather

When you have identified your source or sources, you can begin gathering information. Whether you're analyzing individuals or groups, inside or outside your organization, you should find the answers to several questions.

1. How much does your target audience know about the topic? Determine the levels of knowledge of your audience. Sometimes you can assess knowledge based on job title or organizational position. Once you've determined the knowledge level, you can decide how to communicate.

When your audience knows very little, provide basic information and wording. Move from the familiar to the unfamiliar, use analogies, and use visual aids to clarify.

When your audience knows a lot, include advanced information and relevant technical language.

When some know a lot and some know a little, quickly review relevant background information to inform those who know little. Then, move on to your topic of concern. Define technical terms for those who may not understand.

2. What is your target audience's attitude toward you? Does it have a positive attitude toward you? Are you viewed as being a credible source of information on your topic?

If the audience has a positive attitude toward you, it will tend to be uncritical and respond favorably to your message.

If the audience has a negative attitude toward you, it will be relatively critical and evaluative. You should begin your communication by building rapport. In addition, you

should identify and overcome possible objections by showing your audience potential gains based on argument, logic, and evidence.

If you're an acknowledged expert, you need to briefly remind your audience of your expertise. Your communication will likely gain the attention and support of your audience.

If you're not viewed as an expert, you can establish your credibility by referring to experience, studies, experts, celebrities, or other background that impresses your audience. In addition, you can establish your credibility by showing "you know what you're talking about" in your writing and speaking. Being organized, using language expected by an expert, and being logical and coherent will enhance your credibility.

3. What kind of relationship would best help you achieve your objective? As we suggested in chapter 1, you develop relationships with your audience based on the tone and style of communication. As you consider your desired relationship, ask yourself several questions. What kind of relationship do you currently have with your target audience? What kind of relationship do you need to accomplish your objectives? What relational message should you send to establish the desired relationship? Choosing the right relationship message requires that you balance the following issues.

Follow general business relationship norms. Your communication with higher-level managers would normally be formal, demonstrating respect for their position. The tone for most business communication would likely be professional and friendly, suggesting a desire to establish and maintain good relationships. The tone should be formal and neutral for documents that establish relationships, such as contracts and warrantees, indicating a legal or binding relationship.

Follow the relationship norms of your business. The nature of your communication should fit the norms of your business. Some businesses require a formal tone in meetings and memos. Some businesses are casual and allow a more friendly and informal style of communication. Within every business, the expected tone and style will vary depending on the context. Reports to managers will generally be relatively formal, suggesting a willingness to accede to authority. Communication among team members will generally be casual and informal, suggesting a friendly and equal relationship.

Follow relationship norms established in individual relationships. For example, you would choose an informal approach with friends (e.g., "Hank, let's talk after the meeting on Friday.") instead of the neutral and formal approach that would be used for people you don't know well (e. g., "The meeting is scheduled for Friday.").

Initiate relationships that will help you achieve your objectives. Any communication enables you to make a bid for the relationship you desire. For example, you can use a warm greeting in hopes of initiating a friendly relationship. Your choice of tone and style will be quite different depending on whether you want to be casual, informal, entertaining, serious, intimidating, or unconcerned. The other party may or may not reciprocate. Nevertheless, you can initiate the desired relationship and then adjust, based on the response you get.

Consider all of the previous issues as you choose how you will communicate. You should also consider the kind of relationship that's most likely to help you achieve your

objective. If your objective is to get employees to meet their contractual obligations, you may want to use a formal style and tone in your communications. If your objective is to make subordinates feel like they're part of a team, you may want to communicate in a friendly and respectful manner. If your long-term goal is to build a friendly relationship with higher-level managers, in the appropriate informal contexts, you may find ways to initiate a friendly conversation.

4. How interested is your audience in your topic? Your audience needs a reason to listen to or read your ideas. Unless you know that your audience members are intrinsically interested in your topic, you'll need to find a way to entice them.

If your audience is interested in your topic, briefly remind them of those things that interest them, and then communicate your message.

If your audience has little interest in the topic, find ways to motivate them to pay attention. How can the document or presentation help the audience or the organization? The more specifically you can identify how your topic can help your audience, the more success you'll have. Will it solve problems, increase the likelihood of a promotion, result in increased salary, or answer questions? What's in it for him or her?

5. What is your audience's attitude toward your topic? How will your audience receive your message? Happily? Angrily? Neutrally? Anticipate how your audience will respond, and adapt your message accordingly.

If you must convey bad news, you can anticipate an angry or disappointed response. In this case, a buffer, which introduces the topic but says neither yes nor no, helps to soften the refusal. You could then add a factual explanation, before the actual refusal, that will neutralize your refusal. For example, if you're refusing a contract with a software vendor, a buffer might be to say that you like the company and enjoyed the sales presentation. Then, you could report that several employees tried the software and found that another company's software had more features useful to your specific work applications.

If your message conveys neutral or positive news, you can assume that your audience will receive it well, and you can get straight to the point.

If the audience has a negative or neutral attitude toward your topic or proposal, you will have to argue in your favor and present your proposal after your argument. You may have to settle for a small change in attitude or an acceptance of only part of your proposal. One approach that works well is to provide the audience with options. You could present three different forms of a proposal—modest, moderate, and full-blown—and allow the audience to choose.

If the audience has a positive attitude toward your topic or proposal, you'll need to spend little time arguing for your proposal. You can spend most of the time describing your topic or proposal.

6. What form of communication does your audience expect or prefer? Busy business people expect communications to follow established norms. Your messages are most likely to be accepted when you use the form of communication with which the audience is familiar. If you know the audience's preferences, follow them.

Consider audience expectations for written communication. Organizations develop their own conventions for internal communication. For example, some organizations want certain messages, such as updates on orders, put into e-mail for immediate distribution. However, they may expect other messages, such as policies and procedures, to be given in a formal presentation and distributed in hard-copy handouts. For memos, businesses may specify color-coded paper. For example, they may use red to call attention to highly important news. In addition, supervisors may have personal preferences, such as providing a very specific subject line on memos.

Many organizations also specify desired formats for incoming documents. If businesses specify guidelines, as many do for proposals and orders, follow them. Proposals and orders may be rejected, or at least delayed, when they don't follow prescribed guidelines.

In external documents for which organizations do not provide specific guidelines, follow widely accepted formatting conventions, such as those described in this book.

As you format your documents, consider the following:

Include all expected elements. For example, in a letter, include letterhead or heading, date, inside address, salutation, letter text, and signature block. In a memo, fill in the "To," "From," "Date," "Subject," and sign off on the memo.

Provide desired content. For example, on a resume, include your education and work history. In the first paragraph of a letter of application, include how you learned about the position, mention the specific position desired, and state that you'd like to be considered for the position.

Make the document appear readable. Use white space, headings, and graphics to make the document look professional, attractive, and easily scannable.

Consider audience expectations for presentations. Organizations develop norms for presentations. Some expect presenters to use projected visuals; others do not. Some expect extended time for questions at the end of presentations. Some expect all vendors to make proposals before extended discussions of the proposals occur. We've known businesses that have rejected proposals because conventions for presentations weren't followed. The more you can adapt your presentation to organizational conventions, the more likely you'll be to succeed.

Find out what the audience will expect before your presentation. To make the audience feel comfortable, adapt to all the conventions if possible. If you think you need an exception to conventions to accomplish your objective (for example, you need to use more multi-media than is normally used), get permission from the organization before your presentation.

Here are some conventions you should follow.

Time allotted for the presentation. Meetings for presentations are planned to accommodate time constraints. Violating the time limits provided for your presentation creates scheduling problems for others and probably won't be tolerated.

Nature of content. Many businesses expect a specific kind of content presented because they have developed norms for making decisions based on that content. For example, they may expect certain kinds of financial figures in quarterly

reports or in sales presentations. Ask about those expectations, and adapt to them.

Visuals. Some organizations expect certain kinds of visuals, such as overhead transparencies. Others don't like the darkened rooms that are required for some projection equipment. Try to meet expectations. Check to make sure the equipment necessary for your presentation is available.

Questions. Businesses handle questions differently. Some expect an extended question period at the end of presentations. Others expect questions during the presentation.

Summary

In the example at the beginning of this chapter, the target audience was employees. The goal was to have the employees vote in favor of the insurance package. However, management did not initially assess and adapt to employee concerns. As the next section will show, the management team also failed to choose the most appropriate channels of communication.

CHOOSE APPROPRIATE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS TO ACHIEVE OBJECTIVES

After you've identified your objective and analyzed your audience, you're in a position to choose the appropriate communication channels. Businesses now have many communication channels from which to choose, as electronic communication has drastically changed the way businesses interact. More than ever, people can stay in immediate and constant contact. Many of those communication methods or channels are listed in Figure 2.2. As is illustrated, the communication methods or channels have different characteristics. Some allow for immediate, private, and personal communication, whereas others enable public and formal communication.

Channels of Communication

The illustration in Figure 2.2 was designed to help you think about potential advantages and disadvantages of each communication channel. For example, face-to-face communication tends to be with one person, private, unstructured, and informal. Because you can use gestures and facial expressions, face-to-face communication has rich nonverbal information.

On the other end of the continuum, manuals tend to be public and written for many people. They provide specific information in a permanent record. This type of communication is one-way and has limited nonverbal information.

The Internet can encompass all these forms of communication. On the Internet, you can communicate by e-mail, by voice, in chat rooms or electronic meetings, by video and audio, by displaying reports or letters, and by sending documents. With the use of portable computers and cell phones connected to the Internet, you have access to a highly versatile form of communication from almost anywhere.
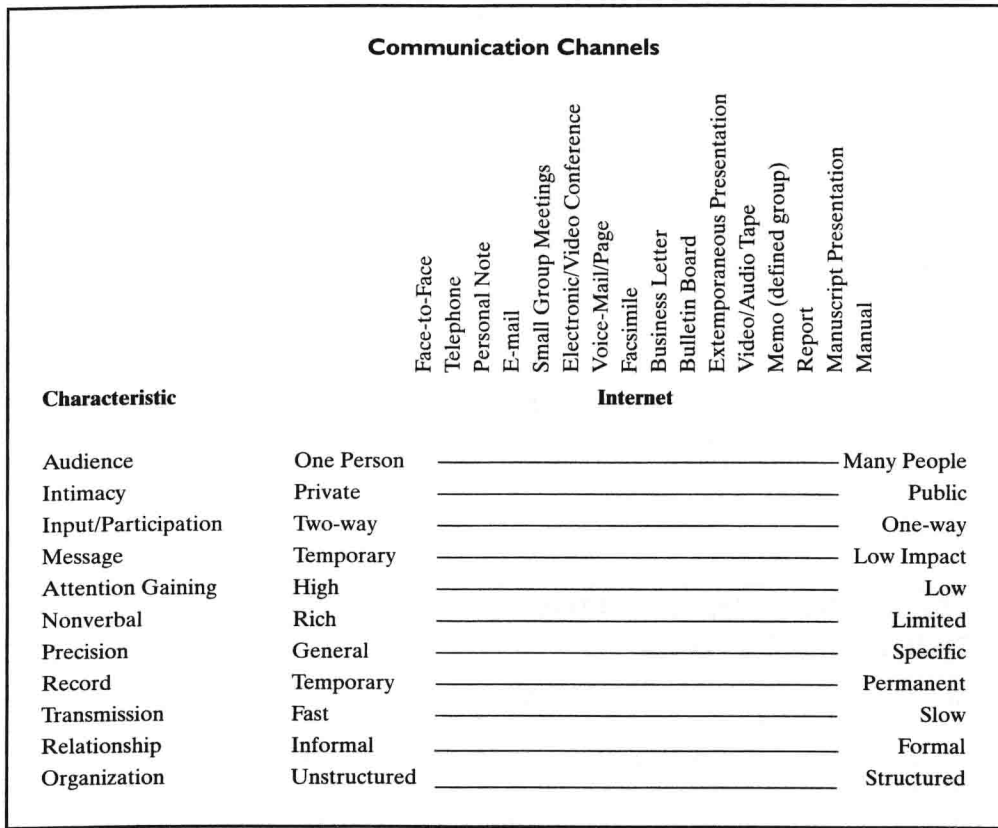
FIGURE 2.2 Characteristics of Communication Channels

In the following list, we summarize the strengths of each channel of communication.

INTERNET
- disperses information to a broad audience
- multimedia capability
- rich source of variety of information, including audio and video
- interaction between sender and receiver
- convenience, speed, and ease of use

FACE-TO-FACE, TELEPHONE, CELL PHONE
- two-way, interactive, and immediate communication
- rich nonverbal communication of attitudes and feelings
- personal attention that can build relationships and establish trust
- networks can be a reliable source of information and influence

E-MAIL, FACSIMILE, VOICE-MAIL, PAGE
- fast transmission to a dispersed audience
- control over sending and reading/hearing messages
- adapt messages to individuals
- permanent written record for e-mail, facsimile

SMALL GROUP MEETINGS, VIDEO CONFERENCE
- rich nonverbal communication of attitudes and feelings
- immediate interaction, participation, and response
- communication that creates understanding, identity, and commitment

ELECTRONIC CONFERENCE (CHAT ROOM)
- interaction among a dispersed audience
- frank (sometimes inflammatory) communication
- permanent written record possible

MEMO, BUSINESS LETTER, REPORT, AND MANUAL
- permanent record that can be dispersed
- carefully prepared, logical, and detailed
- personal control over when message is read

PRESENTATIONS
- prepared message that many hear simultaneously
- potential for rich nonverbal, multimedia presentation
- opportunity to adapt and interact with audience (extemporaneous presentations)
- permanent record (manuscript presentations)

You will undoubtedly use all these forms of communication and combinations of them in your business. For each message, be creative, and design a mix that best accomplishes your goals. Inventive business people have combined traditional forms of communication with electronic media in ways that improve and transform communication.

For example, traditionally, manuals were formal printed documents. Today, manuals can be integrated into computer programs for easy and ready reference. For businesses that provide loans over the telephone, on-line manuals can be integrated into loan application software that is readily accessible by agents. Previously, bulletin boards were relatively slow methods of transferring messages. Now, electronic bulletin boards can be one of the fastest ways to distribute or obtain information.

Communication Channels That Achieve General Management Objectives

The primary functions of management are planning, organizing, leading, and controlling. These functions are used to help an organization accomplish general management objectives. All managers perform these functions to a certain degree, and the variety of communication media can enhance ability to perform management functions. In the following list, we describe how managers might use channels of communication to accomplish management functions.