

Comparison between Traditional and New Media in Business Communication – A Survey of Business Major Students

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This study surveys business major college students on their usage of traditional media, email and new media in business communication. We find that email and new media are consistently ranked after face to face meeting, as the second and third most frequently used communication channels by students.

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1. Introduction

Face-to-face meetings, phone calls, and memos are traditionally the preferred media of business communication. With the wide usage of internet and computers, however, communication through new media such as e-mail and virtual social network has become increasingly popular. Such an increase in popularity is supported by at least two sources. First, smart hand-held devices, ranging from blackberry which targets business users to iPhone and iPad which emphasize ease of use, have become the norm of business and personal communication tools. Second, more and more online communication interfaces such as MSN Messenger, Skype, Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter have become available and are gaining popularity. The successful LinkedIn IPO and the media frenzy for the Facebook IPO expected in May 2012 demonstrate the potential for future growth of the new media.

As a reaction, most companies have opened their own Facebook page, tweet and/or blog regularly. Most professionals have adopted LinkedIn for business contacts. As the current generation of college students grew up with internet, many of them have been exposed to and adopted the new media. Compared to older generations, they are also more likely to use and benefit from new media in the future. However, research on students' exposure of new media has been limited. This study surveys business major college students on their usage of new media, preference of use and their importance perception of new media. We find that although traditional face-to-face meeting is still ranked as number one frequently used channel in business

communication, email and new media are consistently ranked number two and three respectively by students, higher than traditional media such as phone calls and letters. In addition, we also find that traditional channels of communication, such as face to face meetings, phone calls and business memos are still preferred over email to communicate ambiguous and confidential information. Email however is used more to communicate clear information than ambiguous information, and is used more to communicate general business issues than confidential information. Furthermore, our results show that new media, such as Facebook and Twitter, is preferred by students over traditional media to obtain business news, communicate with fellow students and to search for job opportunities.

This study contributes to current communication research and practice in two major ways. Firstly, it is imperative for both business and academia to assess the extent of usage and impact of new media in college students. As students graduate, they would become the next generation of business professionals with their established channels of communication and communication habit. Therefore students' preference and usage of new media will surely impact business communication in the future. Secondly, business educators need to learn of students' communication preference to (1) utilize their communication channels to facilitate more effective learning; and (2) help students refine their communication skills with new media. As such, our exploratory survey provides preliminary evidence on the usage and preference of traditional and new media, which will potentially have a major impact on how to teach in the future.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 contains literature review and hypotheses, Section 3 provides survey methodology, Section 4 provides discussion of survey results and Section 5 contains conclusion for the paper.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

Research on new media in business communication has become a popular topic in the last few years. Studies have also focused on how to apply new media to classroom instructions. But these studies have assumed that all students tend to use new media and that faculty needs to get more updated on new software, applications for mobile media and social media networking sites. Our study surveys students in the business school on their current usage of new media and their perception of how important the new media is for future business communication and for their career success.

Based on other studies mentioned below, we have defined traditional media to include face to face meetings, phone calls and conference calls, business memos and letters. New media includes email, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and LinkedIn and other such online applications.

Kupritz & Cowell (2011) surveyed 24 participants in a single organization who communicated with the higher management using both face to face meetings and emails. Their results showed that the employees preferred face to face meetings when it involved personal issues, human resources issues, annual reviews, any other type of confidential issues, and where problems are too complicated to handle by email. We wanted to test if students felt the same when interacting with faculty and classmates. So our first hypotheses are as follows:

H1a: Traditional media will be preferred over e-mail to communicate (1) bad news, (2) ambiguous information and (3) confidential information.

H1b: E-mail will be more likely used to communicate (1) good news than bad news; (2) clear information than ambiguous information; and (3) general business issues than confidential information.

Roberts & Roach (2009) studies etiquette on social media websites such as Facebook and LinkedIn especially when the user is also looking for jobs. They suggest that job applicants use social media websites to enhance personal branding and at the same time make sure that nothing is posted that they would not want their mother or grandmother to see – the “grandma test” (Lupsa, 2006). In the last few years, expensive Super Bowl advertisements have included online job search sites such as CareerBuilder.com and Monster.com. Further anecdotal evidence shows that students prefer to go online to find information rather than to read a hard copy of journals or newspapers. There has also been a significant rise in online versions of magazines and newspapers as well as summarized news headlines emailed to signed-up readers in the past decade. To test whether this trend is being driven by new media users, we identified the second hypotheses as follows:

H2a: New media will be preferred over traditional media to (1) obtain business news; (2) keep business and personal contacts; (3) seek help and information for study and job opportunities;

H2b: New media will be more like used to (1) keep business contacts than personal contacts; (2) search for job opportunities than for study help.

Recommendation letters have been an interesting issue for our analysis. Sites like LinkedIn have a segment where people can write open recommendations. However, that defeats the purpose of a confidential reference in a sealed envelope. At the same time, employers have admitted to accessing the applicant’s Facebook and LinkedIn pages to get more information about the applicants. So we think that more likely traditional media would be the preferred way to provide confidential recommendations to employers.

One of the issues that came up while surveying the students was whether they perceived new media as important to their career as they were confident in its usage. That implied that the

more they used specific new media, the more they felt that the specific application was essential for their career success. So we hypothesize as follows:

H3: The extent of e-mail and new media usage positively correlate with importance perception of such media.

3. Methodology

The survey contains five parts. Part I asks respondents to state the relative proportion both traditional and new media channels used in business communication. The channels we provide are (1) face to face meeting (2) phone call/conference call, (3) business memo/letter, (4) email, (5) New media, and (6) Other, please specify. Respondents are asked to give the relative proportion each channel used when they initiate communication and relative proportion of time spent in each channel. Part II of the survey focuses on the comparison between traditional channels and email. We ask survey participants to check their preferred channel of use when communicate (1) good news vs. bad news to professors; (2) good news vs. bad news to fellow students; (3) clear vs. ambiguous information and (4) confidential or sensitive information vs. general business issues. Part III of the survey focuses on the comparison between the use of traditional media and new media in the following contents: (1) to obtain business news; (2) to keep track/communicate with fellow students; (3) to keep track/communicate with family members and friends; (4) to seek help/information for questions in your major; (5) to search for job opportunities; and (6) to ask for references or recommendations in job application. Students are asked to give the relative percentage of traditional and new media used for each of the above communication contents. And if they use new media in any of the above content, they are asked to check the specific new media channel used. Facebook, Twitter, Blog, LinkedIn and Other online media are listed as the choices of new media channels. In Part IV of the survey, students

are given a series of statements regarding the importance of email and new media in business communication. For example, one statement is “Email is becoming the most common means of communication in business.” Respondents are asked to mark on a 1-6 Likert scale to indicate their responses, with value “1” indicating strongly disagree, “2” for disagree, “3” for neutral, “4” for agree, “5” for strongly agree and “6” for can’t evaluate. Four of the statements provided relate to email and three for new media. Finally we collect background information, such as genders, ages, ethnicities, majors, native languages and GPAs of two communication courses, of the survey participants in Part V of the survey.

Before survey collection, we asked two professors to proofread our instrument; we also pilot-tested the instrument in four accounting major classes and made minor modifications based on students’ responses. Afterwards, with the cooperation of six business instructors, we administered the survey to twelve classes of business major students in a large public university on the west coast, resulting in 284 responses. Surveys with multiple missing questions were discarded, which leaves 253 usable responses.

4. Results

4.1 Demographic Statistics

Usable surveys were collected from students of four business majors: Accounting, Finance, Management and Marketing¹. Their gender compositions, average ages, proportions of native English speakers, and average grade point averages (GPAs) from two communication courses are presented in Table 1. We also compared these demographic measures among four different

¹ We also collected data from students of Information Systems (IS). But in the business college where data is collected, the number of IS major students is relatively small, fewer than half of the any other major students. In addition, a high proportion of IS major students also have a double business major. We were only able to collect 10 surveys from students with a single IS major, not enough to warrant any statistical analysis. Therefore surveys from these students were excluded from data analysis.

majors and found no statistical difference. Furthermore since we didn't expect or find significant difference among four majors in the data analysis for hypotheses testing, we combined surveys from all four majors and presented results accordingly.

Insert Table 1 about here

Overall there are 253 usable surveys, 50.6% of survey participants are male, and the average age of survey respondents is 23.19. In addition, 63.4% of the respondents are native English speakers, and the overall GPAs of written and oral communication in English are 3.44 and 3.41 respectively. With the exception Age, none of the above demographic measures are correlated with email or new media usage. The effect of Age will be discussed in the following subsection.

4.2 Survey Results and Hypotheses Testing

We first surveyed students' relative proportions of all communication channels used in two aspects: when students initiate communication and the amount of time spent in each channel. Results of this part of the survey (Part I) are presented in Table 2. Results show that the relative percentages from the two aspects are similar. Face to face meeting remains the first choice of business communication channel, consisting around 40% of the overall usage. Email and new media, however, have become the second and third most frequently used channels; occupying around 25% and 16% of the overall usage respectively. Both channels have significantly higher proportion of usage than other traditional channels such as phone and conference calls, and business memos or letters. In other words, traditional phone calls and letters have been replaced by emails and new media in business communication in terms of popularity and extent of usage.

Insert Table 2 about here

Hypotheses 1a focus on the comparison between traditional media and email. Testing results for both H1a and H1b are presented in Table 3. H1a predicts that traditional media will be preferred over email to communicate bad news, ambiguous and sensitive information. Based on results from paired sample t-tests, H1a is supported except for communicating bad news to professors. It is possible that when a student learns of a bad news which needs to be communicated to a professor, she would want to communicate the information as soon as possible. But because professors are not easily accessible by traditional media, the most convenient approach would be email. On the other hand, as fellow students are equally accessible by both traditional channels and email, significantly higher portion of students choose to use traditional channels (62.2%) to communicate bad news over email (41.4%), $t=3.413$, $\text{sig.}<0.001$. Regarding the communication of clear vs. ambiguous information, students have no preference between traditional channels and email when the information is clear ($t=1.423$, $\text{sig.}<0.156$), but prefer to use traditional channels when the information is ambiguous ($t=4.892$, $\text{sig.}<0.0001$). Similarly, they use both types of channels equally when communicating general business issues ($t=-1.225$, $\text{sig.}<0.222$), but prefer traditional channels to communicate confidential or sensitive information ($t=9.279$, $\text{sig.}<0.0001$).

Hypothesis 1b predicts the usage of email in various communication contents. Results show that unlike we expected, email is more used to communicate bad news than good news both to professors and to fellow students. We have explained the possible reasons for the preference of email to communicate bad news to professors in the above paragraph. With respect to communicating bad news to fellow students, we find it difficult to explain. Further

research in this area is needed. As to communicate clear vs. ambiguous information, general vs. confidential information, the results are as predicted. Email is used more to communicate clear than ambiguous information (47.0% vs. 35.9%; $t=2.501$, $\text{sig.}<0.013$), and to communicate general than confidential information (55.8% vs. 26.3%; $t=7.610$, $\text{sig.}<0.0001$).

Insert Table 3 about here

Hypotheses 2a compares the usage of new media with traditional media and predicts new media will be the preferred channel for students to obtain business news, keep track of business and personal contacts and seek help for study and job search. Testing results for H2a and H2b are presented in Table 4. H2a is only partially supported in that new media is preferred over traditional media by students to (1) obtain business news, (2) keep track of business contacts (i.e. the fellow students), and (3) search for job opportunities. But traditional media is preferred to keep track with family members and friends and to seek help for questions in one's major. Given that the average age of survey participants is 23, it is likely that the main family members would be their parents and relatives of the older generation. In contrast to college students, majority of older generation are not frequent users of new media, therefore traditional media will be the preferred means of communication. As to seek help for questions in one's major, students can seek help from fellow major students in classes and through team-based assignments (face to face meeting, with cellphones, and by visit to professors' office hours, all of which are traditional media. Overall these findings show that when traditional media is still highly valued in business and personal communication, but new media starts to be preferred under certain content, such as to obtain business news and to search for job opportunities.

H2b focus on the usage of new media under various communication contents. As expected, we find that the new media is used more to communicate with fellow students than family members (57.9% vs. 45.0%, $t=6.362$, $\text{sig.}<0.0001$), and to search for jobs than to seek help in one's major (59.1% vs. 42.3%, $t=7.846$, $\text{sig.}<0.0001$). Hence H2b is fully supported. In Part III of the survey, students were also asked to check the specific type(s) of new media they use. Their choices are Facebook, Twitter, Blog, LinkedIn and Other online media. The average proportion of specific types of new media checked is provided in Table 5. Facebook is checked the most among the five choices of new media for all six different communication contents. As many as 82.4% of students indicate that they use Facebook to keep track of and communicate with family members and friends.

Insert Table 4 and 5 about here

Hypothesis 3 predicts the effect of self-perpetuation for email and new media use, i.e., the more email/new media used, the more important one would perceive such media in business communication. Importance perception is collected in Part IV of the survey, and usage of email and new media were from Part I and III of the survey. Results for H3 testing are presented in Table 6. Students' perception of three out of the four email related statements are significantly and positively correlated with relative percentage of email usage in business communication from survey Part I. Specifically, the higher proportion of email used, the more strongly they agree with the statements that (1) email is becoming the most common means of communication in business; (2) in order to succeed in the business profession, students and new graduates need to improve their email writing, and (3) a poorly written business or job application email indicates lack of professionalism.

Similarly, students' perception of all three new media related statements are significantly correlated with average percentage of new media usage collected from Part III of the survey. These three correlations range from 0.261 to 0.325, all significant at 0.01 level, indicating that new media usage is positively correlated with how strongly students agree with the following statements: (1) new media will become the most common means of communication in business in the next decade; (2) at this stage of my career, I need to use more new media in business communication to stay current and successful; and (3) in order to succeed in the business professional, students and new graduates need to utilize more media. Hence H3 is supported.

Insert Table 6 about here

5. Conclusion

Research in the last few years has focused on the impact of new media on teaching styles and the business world. There has, however, very little research on the extent to which students have been exposed to new media. This study surveys business major college students on their usage of new media, preference of use and their importance perception of new media. We find that students do have preferences on how they use traditional channels of communication such as face to face meetings, phone calls and business letters and memos versus how they use new media such as emails, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

Confidential or ambiguous information is often preferred to be communicated in face to face meetings while new media and email is used for most other communications. Written letters is now almost a lost art. Recruiters have often complained about the communication skills of new employees. In line with such complaints and observations, our survey shows that students think

that email communication has replaced business memos and written letters in popularity, and email and new media is going to become the most common means of communication in the future. Further, students feel that in order to stay current and successful in business profession, they need to use more new media.

The results of this study come with some caveats. The entire sample of students is from a single university and exposed to the same curriculum at the undergraduate level. The next step in this research is to expand the sample in order to generalize the results. An extension of this study would be to survey both faculty and professionals to compare their usage of new media with that of students. Another extension would be to further explore other new media applications such as Facetime, web conferencing and mobile media as they become more and more popular in day to day business operations.

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Table 1: Demographic Statistics

Demographic Statistics	Accounting	Finance	Management	Marketing	Total
N	N=68	N=61	N=69	N=53	N=253
Gender (male %)	48.5%	54.1%	52.2%	47.2%	50.6%
Age	23.31	23.33	23.24	22.81	23.19
Native speakers (%)	55.1%	66.7%	58.0%	77.4%	63.4%
GPA: Written communication in English	3.40	3.49	3.37	3.44	3.44
GPA: Oral communication in English	3.34	3.44	3.46	3.41	3.41

Table 2: Average Relative Proportions of Communication Channels Used

Communication Channels	When you initiate communication		Time spent in each channel	
	Mean Percentage	Rank	Mean Percentage	Rank
Face to face meeting	40.5%	1	40.5%	1
Phone call/conference call	10.6%	4	11.1%	4
Business memo/letter	3.3%	5	3.2%	5
E-mail	26.9%	2	25.1%	2
New media: Facebook, Twitter, Blog, LinkedIn	15.9%	3	17.3%	3
Other, please specify	2.8%	6	2.9%	6

Table 3: Comparison between Usage of Traditional Channels and Email in Business Communication

To Communicate		Traditional Channels	Email	t	Sig.
Good news to professor	Mean	57.4%	47.0%	1.684	0.093
Bad news to professor	Mean	35.1%	66.5%	-5.363	0.000
	t	5.547	-4.718		
	Sig.	0.000	0.000		
<hr/>					
				t	Sig.
Good news to fellow students	Mean	76.9%	27.1%	9.383	0.000
Bad news to fellow students	Mean	62.2%	41.4%	3.413	0.001
	t	4.561	-4.330		
	Sig.	0.000	0.000		
<hr/>					
				t	Sig.
Clear information	Mean	55.8%	47.0%	1.423	0.156
Ambiguous information	Mean	64.9%	35.9%	4.892	0.000
	t	-2.006	2.501		
	Sig.	0.046	0.013		
<hr/>					
				t	Sig.
Confidential or sensitive information	Mean	76.1%	26.3%	9.279	0.000
Business issues	Mean	48.2%	55.8%	-1.225	0.222
	t	7.344	-7.610		
	Sig.	0.000	0.000		



Table 4: Comparison between Usage of Traditional and New Media in Communication

Communication Content	Traditional Media	New Media	t	Sig.
Obtain company/business news N=246	41.4%	58.6%	-4.139	0.000
Communicate with fellow students	42.1%	57.9%	-4.206	0.000
Communicate with family members/friends N=252	54.9%	45.0%	2.571	0.011
	t	-6.322	6.362	
	Sig.	0.000	0.000	
Seek help/information for questions in major	57.4%	42.3%	3.605	0.000
Search for job opportunities N=249	38.4%	59.1%	-4.924	0.000
	t	8.927	-7.846	
	Sig.	0.000	0.000	
Ask for reference/recommendation N=246	70.22%	29.37%	10.305	0.000

Table 5: Relative Proportions of Various New Media Identified

Communication Content	New Media			
	Face-book	Twitter	Blog	LinkedIn
Obtain company/business news	53.7%	11.2%	22.3%	11.2%
Keep track/communicate with fellow students	81.4%	14.9%	9.9%	7.0%
Keep track/communicate with family members and friends	82.2%	12.0%	9.9%	2.5%
Seek help/information for questions in your major	27.3%	4.6%	10.7%	9.1%
Search for job opportunities	28.1%	6.2%	13.2%	18.2%
Ask for references or recommendations in job application	27.7%	4.6%	2.9%	15.3%
Average rank in all communication content	1	3	2.8	3

Table 6: Correlations between Usage of Email (New Media) and Importance Perception of Email (New Media)

Statements	Email to initiate communication	Time spent in email	
1. E-mail is becoming the most common means of communication in business.	.196**	.152*	
2. In order to succeed in the business profession, students and new graduates need to improve their e-mail writing.	.168**	0.114	
3. A poorly written business or job application e-mail indicates lack of professionalism.	0.122	.130*	
4. During job application/interview process, e-mail communication is not evaluated as much as face-to-face communication.	-0.121	-0.026	
	New media to initiate communication	Time spent in new media	Average usage of new media
5. New media* will become the most common means of communication in business in the next decade.	0.086	0.050	.261**
6. At this stage of my career, I need to use more new media* in business communication to stay current and successful.	0.021	0.012	.270**
7. In order to succeed in the business profession, students and new graduates need to utilize new media*.	0.026	0.025	.325**

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).