



New York Society of Association Executives



To Call, or Not to Call?

NYSAE's recent Professional Development session on *To Call, or Not to Call?* focused on communication in the workplace. More than 25 attendees representing numerous industry segments across multiple generations participated.



Michael Cummings, Principal, Cummings/Tate, led an NYSAE Professional Development Workshop on To Call or Not To Call?

Michael Cummings, Principal of Tate/Cummings, facilitated a discussion regarding the use and misuse of common communication methods, such as phone, email, and texting, as well as the misunderstandings that can emerge from utilizing one instead of the other when communicating with colleagues, members, and clients.

For instance, much has been made of the fact that there are now four generations working side-by-side (Silents, born between 1925 and 1946; Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964; Generation Xers, born between 1965 and 1980; and Millennials, born after 1980). Each generation has a very different notion regarding communication.

Millennials, for example, are generally phone call averse and gravitate toward texting and email over live conversations, while Boomers tend to gravitate toward the practicality of the phone and in-person meetings. Meanwhile, many Boomers consider uninvited texting an invasion of their privacy.

Cummings reminded the audience that simply possessing someone's mobile number does not imply permission to text them. "For most of us," Cummings said, "texting is the last unblemished, free zone, and we are not quite ready for the workplace to invade it."

The topic of emoji, emoticons, and the exclamation point also came up. While many attendees expressed that the use of exclamation points in their emails did not feel authentic, Cummings reminded the group that with email, recipients oftentimes misinterpret a lack of an exclamation point as a lack of enthusiasm or worse—hostility.

"When we have Oxford English Dictionaries selecting an emoji—a symbol—as its 2015 Word of the Year, said Cummings, "we must accept the fact that workplace communication is changing. Email and texting can now mimic telephone conversations in that an emoji allows users to include expressions of emotion in their written communications, a luxury previously available only to phone users, and a direct result of the Millennial's proclivity for texting and email."

The group also determined that email works best for conveying information but not so for situations requiring complex concepts and a dialogue, situations where the phone call still trumps all. Paradoxically, though, one should refrain from sending overly wordy correspondence via email because the majority of recipients are reading it on a tiny screen—their mobile phones.

Meanwhile, phone calls are important when there is a sense of urgency but are absolutely essential for maintaining confidentiality. "We tend to forget that email is the Internet," Cummings said. "Once something is in an email, it is just one small step away from being public information. Just look at the Sony hack. If you have something confidential to convey, it is critical to avoid the lure of the convenience of email and opt for a phone call or a meeting."

The topic of setting work and personal boundaries also emerged during the discussion. With US smartphone penetration having reached 75% in 2015, the once ubiquitous work-issued phone is now *rara avis*, and there is an expectation among employers that staff will use their own phones, their personal property, for work business. That has led to an environment that not only creates confusion over reimbursement but also encourages work communication on nights and weekends. "It's hard to resist checking work email," said Cummings, "when you're already looking at Facebook on your phone at night."

Attendees also discussed leaving voice mails, setting up meetings, and the perils of auto-fill email addresses (they are often outdated).

Ultimately, the method of communication one selects should be matched to the specific scenario. Bonnie White, Director of National Accounts at Fontainebleau Miami Beach, summed it up best saying, "I determine the best method of communication based on the situation. Oftentimes, I'll utilize email to set up a time to speak; or speak first and continue the conversation on email. It all depends on the situation."

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