

Face-to-Face Communications Is Powerful, Postdigital Communications Tool

John Egan

In Malcolm Gladwell's first book, *The Tipping Point*, he asked, and answered, a number of provocative questions about change, including why word-of-mouth communications continues to be so powerful.¹

"What is now obvious to me," he wrote in the book's afterword, "is that we are about to enter the age of word of mouth, and that, paradoxically, all of the sophistication and wizardry and limitless access to information of the New Economy is going to lead us to rely more and more on very primitive forms of social contacts"—in other words, a rise in direct, person-to-person information sharing, unmediated by digital technologies.

E-MAIL IMMUNITY

By the time Gladwell's book was published in 2000, e-mail had become the preferred (soon to be predominant) means of communications, at least for businesses. Gladwell argued that as more and more business-to-business communication takes place over e-mail, gradually we become immune to it. Like a disease where the body fights back by developing a resistance, readers have developed e-mail immunity, where each e-mail had just a little less impact than its predecessor. In the same way that overprescription of antibiotics led to strains of antibiotic-resistant viruses, the overuse of e-mail

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soon made most of us e-mail-resistant (e-mails from our bosses excepted, of course).

Readers have developed e-mail immunity.

As e-mail immunity started taking root in corporate America, consumers soon followed. Deluged by e-mails from marketers, consumers soon built up their own resistance. They scanned rather than read. They set up spam filters. They blocked suspicious or unwanted content.

The properties that initially made e-mail so successful—its speed, its low cost, its customization—led to its overuse, and its declining effectiveness.

SOCIAL MEDIA IMMUNITY

The Tipping Point was published several years before social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter started changing our world. And while those platforms dominate communications today, there is little doubt that social media will, over time, create immunity among its users.

Like the other social epidemics Gladwell explored in *The Tipping Point*, social media eventually will so oversaturate its users that they will develop immunity to it. We can debate exactly where we are on the immunity timeline, but what seems clear is that social media, like e-mail, eventually will lose its power.

Then what?

FACE-TO-FACE OUTREACH

In today's hyper-digitized, always-on, over-messaged world, one way to break through the noise is to move to a different level: engage in face-to-face (F2F) conversations. A small number of oil and gas producers and energy utilities

understand and practice this. Going forward, we project their ranks will grow.

Today's communications challenge is not a binary, "either/or" proposition—either we use this one type of vehicle exclusively or we use another exclusively. Rather, it is a "both/and" challenge, blending analog, digital, and personalized communications to bring about the desired effect.

As the world continues to digitize, it can be easy to forget, or overlook, the power of people and personalized communications. Vanessa K. Bohns, a professor of organizational behavior at the ILR School of Cornell University, has written persuasively on the extent to which people can influence others in a variety of situations. One of her articles in *Harvard Business Review* shows an in-person request is 34 times more successful than one delivered via e-mail.² Another showed how people systematically underestimate their influence over others in a person-to-person setting.³

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I have interviewed energy-company communicators who believe that direct interaction with their stakeholders, via door-to-door outreach or at community events like open houses, farmers' markets, health fairs, youth sporting events, and cultural festivals, is the most cost-effective way to build bridges to current and prospective customers. However, my impression is these companies are in the distinct minority.

For energy communicators and marketers, Gladwell's view about e-mail immunity and Bohns' work on influence mean we need to reconsider the power of F2F communications. Tweeting works with some groups, but it's not enough. Websites are a necessary but often insufficient informational tool. Earned media is important—but it only reaches people who read newspapers or watch the news. Newsletters and magazines are great, but they can't do the job alone.

For energy companies, effective communications strategy and tactics will be a blend of analog, digital, and personal outreach—an "all of the above" approach.

F2F outreach, mainly via a sustained campaign of knocking on doors, registering voters, and soliciting donations, played a critical role in electing and reelecting Barack Obama as president. The Girl Scouts have for years sold their cookies on a door-to-door basis. In recent years, electric utilities have been thrown off their game by residents' installing rooftop solar panels, which typically were sold on a door-to-door basis.

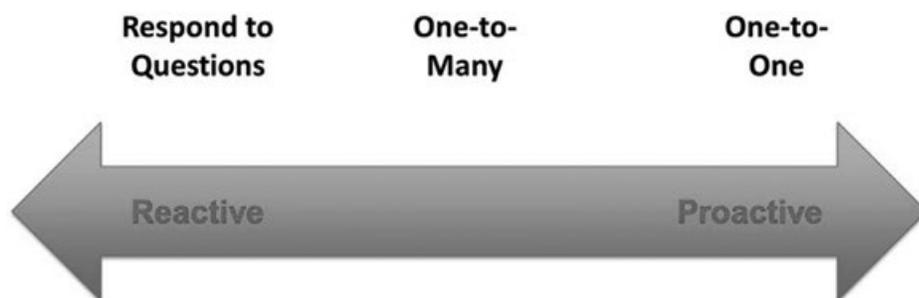
F2F CONTINUUM: FROM REACTIVE TO PROACTIVE

In my work with energy communicators, I have come to see F2F outreach as a continuum of activities that stretches from "reactive" to "proactive." See **Exhibit 1**.

Reactive: Responding to Questions

Rare is the energy company that treats its employees like mushrooms—keeping them in the dark, covering them with manure, and then har-

Exhibit 1. F2F Communications Consortium



Source: Egan Energy Communications.

vesting them. Instead, it is widely accepted that employees are critical stakeholders in a company, and employees deserve to know about important developments at the same time as other stakeholders, like investors. Securities laws aside, employees certainly deserve to know important news before other external stakeholders, like the news media and the community. Employees should never be put in the position of being the last to know about a company accident, price increase, merger, leadership change, downsizing, or an important regulatory ruling.

One added reason to make employee communications a “first among equals” is that once word leaks out to the media and the community, friends and neighbors will ask the energy-company employees what they know about the development in question. Most energy-company officials want their employees to be fully informed about important developments, partly so they can answer the questions they are bound to receive from those in their networks.

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At this left edge of the continuum, companies provide information to employees so they can respond to questions. “We want you to be able to answer any questions you may receive” is the common-sense way managers typically approach this type of information-sharing.

What keeps this group on the left-hand side of the double-tipped arrow is the expectation (sometimes the admonition) that employees should wait to be asked a question. Though managers commonly want employees to be informed so they can answer questions, it is the rare energy company that makes a specific “ask” of its employees that they proactively communicate with their network about important corporate matters. That is on the other side of the F2F communications continuum.

Reactive: Speakers Bureau

This is a vehicle used by some utilities and oil and gas producers to engage in “one-to-many” communications. Speakers bureaus are a common communications vehicle for energy companies. But speakers bureaus are neither ubiquitous nor universal among energy companies:

For example, I was surprised when, at a recent utility-industry conference, less than 10 percent of the audience said they had a speakers bureau.

In their most general form, speakers bureaus exist to field requests for a company representative to speak to a specific audience about a specific topic. For example, the graduating class of a local high school may want to learn more about potential careers at the local utility or oil and gas company, or the “Concerned Citizens of Albemarle County” wants someone to speak to their monthly meeting on hydraulic fracturing.

Whether it’s the Elks Club, the Kiwanis International, a local Boy or Girl Scout troop, an economic development group, or an environmental organization, there are numerous local nongovernmental organizations that have questions about energy, the environment, the economy, and the community. A speakers bureau is a low-cost, potentially high-impact way to communicate on a “one-to-many” basis.

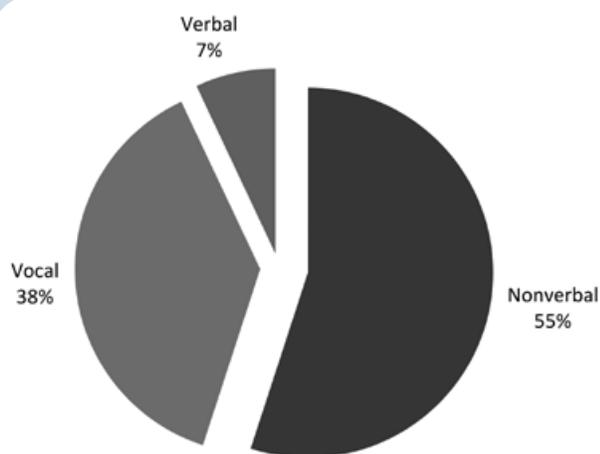
When it comes to jobs, the future, the environment, safety, the community, or energy—emotional topics all—most audiences are hungry for information, particularly during uncertain times. But audience members also want to take the full measure of the person delivering the information. That means they will pay close attention to the verbal and the nonverbal elements of the company’s representative. Sometimes speakers can say a lot without moving their lips. Psychology professor Albert Mehrabian has shown that most of the meaning in interpersonal communications comes not from words but from nonverbal and vocal signals (**Exhibit 2**).⁴

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Proactive: One-to-One

When you need to buy a new car, who do you trust—a TV ad or your neighbor who drives the make and model you want to buy? When your child is considering a college, do you rely exclusively on that college’s website or do you seek an alumna for the inside story? When you have been offered a new job, are you satisfied with the information provided by the human resources department, or do you want to speak with current or former employees to get the “real” story about life at that company? Advertisements, websites,

Exhibit 2. Verbal and Nonverbal Communications



Source: Mehrabian, A. (1980). *Silent messages: Implicit communication of emotions and attitudes*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

and informational packages can provide you with basic facts and features. But on important decisions, you also want to speak with someone who has direct knowledge and experience.

An F2F conversation allows you to take the conversation in a direction you want to go. You can ask follow-up questions. You can assess the veracity of the speakers by their body language—eye contact, hand gestures, speaking pace, and the like. You can watch for alignment between verbal and nonverbal elements.

As with one-to-many communications, one-to-one communications are critically shaped by a speaker's nonverbal signals. But that inspection takes place on a closer, even microscopic level when that conversation takes place between two people.

The ability to gather the information you deem important and to reach your own conclusions is what makes one-to-one communications so powerful.

The ability to gather the information you deem important and to reach your own conclusions is what makes one-to-one communications so powerful. If the speaker is deemed trustworthy, you tend to worry less about the specific facts and data they convey. But if the speaker does not have authenticity and transparency, no amount of facts can overcome that impression.

Proactive one-to-one communications means a company's leaders inform employees and retirees about significant matters, then ask those employees or retirees to *proactively* act as the company's feet on the street—megaphones for the news the company wants to convey.

Comparatively few energy companies engage in proactive one-to-one communications. Our research into this topic, summarized in the following cases, suggests energy companies have a lot to gain by engaging in F2F communications.

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PEOPLE POWER: THREE CASES

Chattanooga EPB: Proactive One-to-One Communications

The Chattanooga Electric Power Board (EPB) provides electric service to about 175,000 customers in and around Chattanooga, Tennessee. The utility employs 500 people and has about 400 retirees. All 900 were asked to serve as "feet on the street" nearly a decade ago when the utility was considering offering fiber optic services to its customers, according to EPB's former President and CEO Harold DePriest.

"It always comes down to people, no matter how complex the technology," he said. "The authentic, F2F conversations EPB employees had with their friends and neighbors played a critical role in the successful launch of the utility's fiber optics business. And thank goodness for those communications. Today, EPB makes more on fiber than it does on electricity."

EPB's 900 "megaphones" were "10 times more powerful than press releases," the recently retired DePriest told me. "The employees and retirees were a huge adjunct sales force that helped us successfully launch the new business."

Why do employees and retirees agree to act as EPB's feet on the street? DePriest said that's easy: "They're proud of their service and they're proud of their utility as a community asset dedicated to improving the lives of those they serve."

LG&E/KU: Proactive One-to-One Communications

When Louisville Gas & Electric (LG&E) or its corporate sibling Kentucky Utilities

Speaking to People Where They Are Most Comfortable

Some readers may be thinking “We don’t need a speakers bureau. If we have something to say, we hold a community meeting at our headquarters and anyone who cares can come listen.”

Maybe your experience is different from mine and the experiences of numerous other energy communicators I have interviewed. But most people I speak with say the “come to our headquarters” approach is problematic at best.

I recently visited with Alice Dietz, the communications and public relations manager for Cowlitz Public Utility District, on the topic of venues and public outreach. Our discussion closely tracked discussions I have had with other energy communicators over the years. A salient extract follows.

“We tried holding public outreach meetings at our headquarters, but no one ever came,” Alice told me. “But now that we’re speaking at meetings held at a ‘neutral’ location, like a Lions or Elks or Rotary Club location, we’re reaching far more people, and that’s led to much better engagement. It’s always better to meet at a place where people feel comfortable.”

With Alice’s encouragement, Cowlitz PUD’s general manager or a board member now speak at about 20 local service club meetings per year. The GM also attends another dozen or so of those meetings annually to network. Alice told us the “go to their turf” strategy is working well: “It has improved how the community views us, and that affects their willingness to work with us.”

“Even if you just speak at one Rotary Club meeting, you’re going to meet more members of the public than if you hold meetings at your headquarters,” Alice says. “As monopolies, utilities are in a unique situation. In many markets, we are the only game in town. But we still need to break down barriers and show our communities a human face.”

(KU) need a few extra sets of hands to collect Toys for Tots at Christmastime, or staff a hospitality booth at the Kentucky Derby, they put out the word to their several thousand retirees across the Bluegrass State. If they need 10 or 20 people, they typically get 50 or more retirees volunteering.

For over 20 years, former employees at LG&E and KU have been relying on their retirees to be a virtual extension of the utility’s presence in the community.⁵ LG&E and KU have consciously mobilized their retirees and made wise use of them as adjunct resources to complement the work of paid staffers in community relations, communications, and marketing.

The retirees have broken down barriers, put a face and name on the utility, educated customers, and occasionally have been enlisted to advocate on issues that affect the utility and its customers, including the following:

- Explained changes in retiree benefits to other retirees
- Discussed with their neighbors the utility’s stance on important issues like price increases, infrastructure investments, environmental projects, and hydro relicensing
- Participated in classroom instruction on history, safety, and careers in the utility industry.

Sandy Gentry, a supervisor in LG&E’s Office of Special Projects, said the following in an interview:

Our retirees are a valuable institutional memory—why shouldn’t we use them? Retirees have the ability to talk to their neighbors on a “guy next door” level, without sounding corporate. We are consciously using them to expand our reach into the community.

Our retirees have an emotional connection to the people and the utility where they spent their working years. They want to keep that alive. Without a doubt, retirees are one of our most important communications and community relations assets.

Encana: Proactive One-to-One Communications

Five or six years ago, as oil and gas drilling was becoming more prevalent in Colorado’s Denver-Julesburg Basin, drillers were coming into closer contact with residential subdivisions, something that had not happened in other, more-established basins such as those in Texas or North Dakota.

Although oil and gas extraction has taken place in Colorado for decades, until about 2011

it had taken place mainly in rural settings, far removed from dense residential subdivisions. But starting about six years ago, homeowners, many of them living in new, fast-growing Front Range communities like Erie, started having an increased number of questions and concerns about nearby oil and gas drilling.

Doug Hock, a public relations practitioner for Encana Corporation, had seen how attendee-directed open houses the company held in and around the Barnett Shale, the Marcellus Shale, and Western Colorado had been effective in answering homeowners' concerns and de-escalating tensions. Thus, he decided to hold a series of open houses in and around Erie, where the company's subject-matter experts (SMEs) could answer the questions of nearby residents.

What made those open houses so successful, Hock recalled, was their unstructured nature. Rather than follow traditional industry practice of convening a public meeting—having people sit in chairs as one or more SMEs deliver more or less technical presentations before taking questions from the audience—Encana opted for a less-structured approach. Encana set up several stations around the perimeter of a public space and allowed attendees to go to whichever station they chose, in whatever order they chose, to ask questions of the SMEs.

Rather than make the audience sit quietly until the company's experts had their say, Encana said to attendees, in effect, "Let's have the conversation you want to have, according to whatever order you select."

Hock said: "We found the unstructured, attendee-directed open houses worked much better than traditional public meetings with prepared PowerPoint slides. That more-traditional format also provided opponents with an opportunity to hijack a microphone and make speeches."

But the level of interest, concern, and inaccurate information circulating through Erie convinced Encana they needed to go beyond unstructured open houses, Hock continued. Thus, starting around 2012, a select few company employees began what they called a "walk-about" through select Erie neighborhoods, seeking to hold face-to-face conversations with as many homeowners as possible.

Hock said, "Over a period of several years, mostly on Saturdays, our employees engaged

with several hundred people in a very specific geographic area." That effort, too, was a success. He said: "Any time you can interact on a one-on-one basis with stakeholders, it's a good thing. The act of having a face-to-face conversation with people generally de-escalated passions. People were generally civil—no one we spoke with went nuclear. Because we put a name and a face on Encana, people felt empowered."

Encana sold its Front Range oil and gas properties in 2015, but Hock remains a believer in F2F communications: "In our experience, direct face-to-face interaction opened lines of communications and built trust. I would recommend it to other energy companies."

CONCLUSION

During their normal course of business, energy companies—both oil and gas firms and energy utilities—engage in activities that need to be explained to the public. Many stick with tried-and-true means of communications, such as fliers, advertisements, and news articles. A growing number are opting to communicate digitally with affected residents, using e-mail, social media, texting, and digital apps.

Both approaches have their place. Thus, too, does direct, F2F interaction, which as far as we can tell, relatively few energy companies are practicing. As we become more and more inured to e-mail and other forms of digital communications, some energy companies are finding that the best road forward draws on what we all learned in the past: anonymity breeds suspicion, but openness can build trust. 

NOTES

1. Gladwell, M. (2000). *The tipping point*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company.
2. Bohns, V. (2017, April 11). A face-to-face request is 34 times more successful than an email. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2017/04/a-face-to-face-request-is-34-times-more-successful-than-an-email>.
3. Bohns, V. (2015, August 5). You're already more persuasive than you think. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2015/08/research-were-much-more-powerful-and-persuasive-than-we-know>.
4. Mehrabian, A. (1980). *Silent messages: Implicit communication of emotions and attitudes*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth; Mehrabian, A. (2009). *Nonverbal communications*. New York, NY: Routledge.
5. Egan, J. (2016, March). Your utility's new feet on the street. *American Gas*, pp. 30–31.