Investigating the probability of receiving more replies to a posted letter rather than an email

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ABSTRACT

Electronic mail is a powerful means of communication. It is fast become a primary means of communication. It is however different from other means of communication, for instance the dimensions differ in: speed, permanence of the message; cost of distribution, deliverance to individuals and groups; an ability to filter, channel, record, and control messages. There is also a lack of 'intimacy' inherent in email that many believe does exist in posted letters. This can be a problem when emailing unknown persons in the hope of generating a response to a matter which relies on their taking time to ponder the query and compose a reply. We set out to examine whether posted letter would elicit more replies than emails and the rest of this paper describes the results. We conclude that posting a letter does indeed induce more replies than email.

Introduction

Electronic mail is becoming the most widely used form of communication today, but is limited in terms of communicating with respect to emotion in particular. The biggest problems in electronic mail are misinterpretation of e-mails and lack of ability to express oneself. Electronic communication, because of its speed and broadcasting ability, is obviously different from paper-based communication such as letters. Because the exchange of messages can be so fast, e-mail is more conversational than traditional letters. For instance, in a letter, it can be important to make everything completely clear because the other person may not have a chance to ask questions, or their native language might not be the same. However, with email, others can ask questions immediately therefore email akin to conversational speech, is not as formal and neat as communications via posted letter (Sherwood, 2007). Some commentators have also mentioned that with the accelerated pace of life at present, email seems the perfect medium for a hectic day. In other words, simply get that idea down and shoot it out and obviously little of this encourages a thoughtful revision prior to hitting send (Goleman, 2007). For many centuries, letter-writing was a high literary form where ordinary people put great thought into their words, and laboured over style. This seemed part of the process and ensured that a letter was worth sending before posting. We can see this through the numerous volumes of "Collected Letters of…", from Abe Lincoln to Teresa of Avila. It is doubtful as to whether there will ever be such volumes of collected e-mails (Goleman, 2007).

Interestingly, there are a number of online services which translate email into snail mail for a fee. One example is NetGram's E-mail Bridge which is an automated, web and e-mail based system providing convenience for users wishing to send hard copy communications to people who do not have email. This however does not overcome the aforementioned problems of email communication. There is also the problem of SPAM. This research is not directed at the problem of SPAM suffice to say that the unceasing arrivals of unsolicited email

hardens us to emails from non-spamming individuals making requests for information (Filman, 2003; Deepak & Parameswaran, 2005; Gburzynski & Maitan, 2004). This can be a problem if one is seeking important information for whatever reason from a third party.

(Daft and Lengel, 1986) advanced the notion that communication richness (or leanness) is an invariant, objective property of communication media. They argue that individuals would choose media higher in richness for those managerial tasks higher in equivocality or ambiguity. They state "information richness is defined as the ability of information to change understanding within a time interval. Communication transactions that can clarify ambiguous issues to change understanding in a timely manner are considered rich. Communications that require a long time to enable understanding or that cannot overcome different perspectives are lower in richness……Communication media vary in the capacity to process rich information.... In order of decreasing richness, the media classifications are (1) face-to-face, (2) telephone, (3) personal documents such as letters or memos, (4) impersonal written documents, and (5) numeric documents. The reason for richness differences include the medium's capacity for immediate feedback, the number of cues and channels utilized, personalization, and language variety.... Face-to-face is the richest medium because it provides immediate feedback so that interpretation can be checked. Media of low richness process fewer cues and restrict feedback, and are less appropriate for resolving equivocal issues. However, an important point is that media of low richness are effective for processing well understood messages and standard data (Daft and Lengel, 1986), (Ngwenyama and Lee, 1997).

(Carlson and Zmud, 1994) put forward the "channel expansion theory" which rejects the idea that communication richness is an invariant, objective property of the communication medium itself, independent of the social context where the communication takes place. (Lee, 1994) provides an account of how richness occurs in communication that uses electronic mail

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(e-mail). In examining actual e-mail exchanged among managers in a corporation, the analysis interprets the managerial use of the communication medium of e-mail as the users themselves understand and experience it. Employing the research approach of interpretivism in general and hermeneutics in particular, the analysis finds that richness or leanness is not an inherent property of the e-mail medium, but an emergent property of the interaction of the e-mail medium with its organizational context, where the interaction is described in terms of distanciation, autonomization, social construction, appropriation, and enactment. ConductiveChat (DiMicco et al, 2002) incorporates additional affect information into a text-based messaging interface with the goal of enriching the communication experience. EmoteMail (Angesleva, 2004) is an email client that is augmented to convey aspects of the writing context to the recipient. The client captures facial expressions and typing speed and introduces them as design elements. These contextual cues provide extra information that can help the recipient decode the tone of the mail. Moreover, the contextual information is gathered and automatically embedded as the sender composes the email, allowing an additional channel of expression. By capturing a snapshot of the face of the writer with every paragraph, the system attempts to display the fluctuation of the emotions throughout the message, rather than attempting to summarize the whole message as a certain mood. Empathy Buddy (Liu et al., 2002) is a Eudora Email Client Add-on which attempts to give email contextual tone by analysing the textual content of the message similar to Emote Email. (Kaplowitz et al., 2004) examined the effect of surface mail contacts on Web survey response rates and the relative merit of using a mail survey in a population that has ready access to the Web based on a larger research effort at Michigan State University (MSU). They found that a Web survey application achieved a comparable response rate to a mail hard copy questionnaire when both were preceded by an advance mail notification. The cost differential between the mailed hard copy questionnaire treatment and the Web survey treatments with mailed advance notice was substantial. The findings suggested that, in a population in which each member has Web access, a Web survey application can achieve a comparable response rate to a questionnaire delivered by surface mail if the Web version is preceded by a surface mail notification.

The majority of research above has tended to concentrate of the shortfalls of email communication as a medium and none concentrates on comparing replies received via postal letters and emails as we have done here. This research therefore set out to investigate the probability of whether a response is more likely to occur from sending a letter containing a stamped addressed envelope or from a simple email. The following section details the experiment.

Evaluation of Email versus Postal Mail

We contacted 150 individuals broken down into 6 distinct groups throughout the mainland of England and Northern Ireland. We sent emails to 150 individuals asking them to response with a brief reply as to the "most useful technology/gadgets" that they deal with in everyday work life. We also send a short letter containing a stamped addressed envelope to the same 150 individuals a few days later asking them to reply listing the "most frustrating technology/gadgets" used by them in everyday life. In total, 300 requests would have been sent to these individuals. We broke the sample into 6 distinct groups for various reasons. Citizens' advice groups were chosen because of the nature of their role in assisting the public.

Churches were chosen to see whether Christian ministers were as likely to reply as, say, a Windows firm. Members of Parliament were chosen due to their public role and Web design companies were chosen as we wondered whether they were much more likely to email rather than post the reply. Direct mail & Double Glazing/windows firms were chosen as they 'live and die' by their unsolicited mail shots and we also wanted them to have a 'taste of their own medicine'.

We attempted to control as many variables as possible. The group size was only 150 and we acknowledge that a larger set would have been much more scientific but we do believe that these results are solid here and the overall trend is not that likely to deviate too much. We believe however than many individuals may not have posted the letters to us as they had previously received emails asking for "their most useful computing technology" and without fully reading the letter assumed that this was a similar request and "binned it". There were a few letters (including two letters from the House of Parliament" which stated that they were unable to take part in the survey due to the sheer number of requests. This was a little strange, as there were only ever two requests sent by us to each individual. In future, we will stagger the posting of letters with the sending of emails as well as comparing the response rates to hand written letters and printed letters. We do believe that there are three categories. Here however we simply investigate the printed letter (with handwritten signature & handwritten address) and electronic mail.

Figure 1: Total number of replies to Emails and Postal letters out of 300

No. of Email Replies	No. of Postal Replies
32	48

Figure 1 outlines the number of replies achieved electronically and through snail mail. There were 32 persons who replied to 150 emails and there were 48 persons who replied to 150 letters. Figure 2 illustrates the results to the surveying of persons through email and letter. We can see that letters are more likely to generate a response by up to 17%. Figure 3 shows this information in comparison to the 220 messages which received no response.

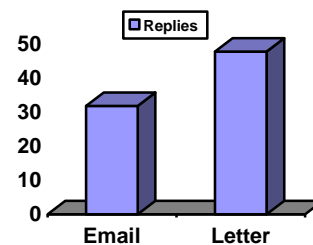**Figure 2: No. of Email v Letter replies**

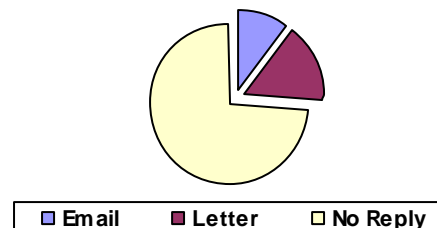**Figure 3: Comparing replies v Non replies**

Figure 4 illustrates the responses we received broken down into various categories comprising 25 individuals. We can see that Citizens advice bureaus were the most responsive, closely followed by pastors from the UK Assemblies of God

organization. Next were Direct mail and electronic marketing companies, web design companies and politicians. The worst offenders were double glazing windows firms.

Figure 4: Categorization of email replies

Email Replies by Category	# Replies
Citizens Advice Bureaus	8
Churches	7
Direct Mail & Email Marketing	5
Web Design Companies	5
Politicians (MPs)	5
Double Glazing Windows Firms	2

Error! Reference source not found. illustrates the data from these tables in another form. Again we can see that Citizens advice bureaus are the best at responding while Windows Glazing firms are the poorest at responding to electronic email requests for information relating to a simple query on "frustrating computing devices" in the workplace.

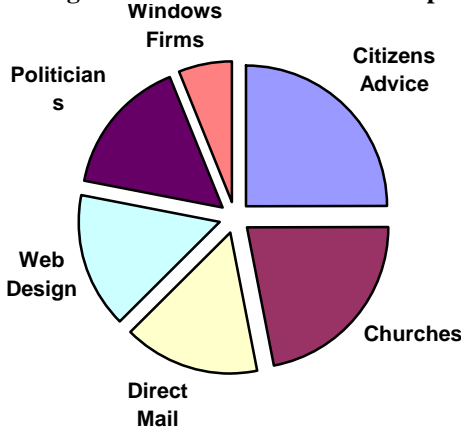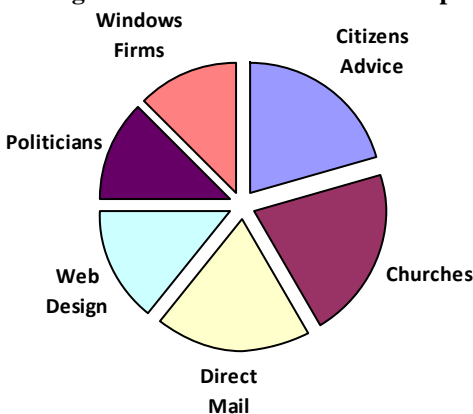**Figure 5: Breakdown of Email Replies**


Figure 6: Breakdown of Posted Replies

Interestingly, we found that the same ranking order appeared in the postal replies as well as the email replies as shown in **Error! Reference source not found.**. We found that Citizens advice bureaus narrowly defeated the Churches for the most replies in the email category and both were top for the postal replies. The worst for replying electronically were Double Glazing Windows companies closely followed by Members of Parliament while both were equally last in the postal replies (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

Error! Reference source not found. illustrates the merged results of emailing and posting letters to 150 individuals requesting information. Again, as in the earlier unmerged results, we can see that Citizens advice bureaus narrowly defeat the Churches for the most replies. The next best are direct mail and web design companies. The poorest at replying are Double Glazing Windows companies closely followed by Members of Parliament.

Figure 7: Categorization of posted replies (ranked)

Postal Replies by Category	# Replies
Citizens Advice Bureaus	10
Churches	10
Direct Mail & Email Marketing	9
Web Design Companies	7
Politicians (MPs)	6
Double Glazing/Windows Firms	6

Figure 8: Overall Breakdown of Replies by category
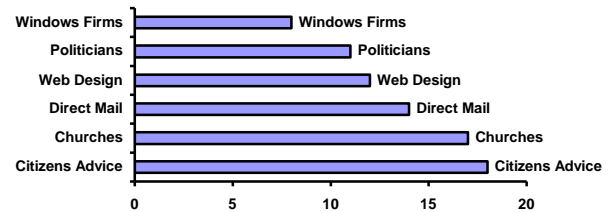
We summarize the overall results to our question of asking them to list their "….most Useful/Greatest Computing Technology" replies through email in **Error! Reference source not found.**.

Figure 9: Items of office related technology found to be useful

Category	Most useful Technology	Category	Most useful Technology
Citizens Advice Bureau	Lotus Notes, Databases, CAB CARMA Case Recording Software, Email, USB pen drives, Photoshop, Mobile Phones, Broadband Internet	Churches	Word processors, Email DTP Publishers, Excel PowerPoint, Bible Software, MP3 Player, Email, PDA, Mobile Phone, Digital Camera
Direct Mail & Email Marketing	PC, Databases, Mobile Phones, Skype, Email, Online Banking, Excel, Photoshop, Web Site Design Editors, Word, Acrobat, Google AdWords, Google Analytics, Internet, 802.11	Web Design Companies	Dreamweaver, Browser, Photoshop, Mac/PC, Internet/Broadband, Camera, Scanner, Mobile Phone, Email, CRM Systems
Double Glazing Windows Firms	PC, Mobile Devices, Customer Relationship Management Software, Order Processing Systems, Email, Scanners, Mobile phones	Politicians	OED Online, Mobile Smartphones, Mobile Phones

We summarize the results of querying the group as to their "….most frustrating Computing Technology/Gadget". These were solicited through posted letter and are shown in **Error! Reference source not found.**.

We were particularly disappointed by a number of MPs who simply wrote back to tell us that they were too busy to answer the question. Obviously we are not sure whether it was simply their secretary who composed the reply by themselves and indeed no-one is under obligation to answer each request for information they receive but surely a one word answer would have been quicker. We would however like to publicly thank the RT Hon Hilary Armstrong, RT Hon Harriet Harman and the RT Hon David Hanson for taking the time out of their day to answer our requests personally. We were delighted to find how responsive the majority of Citizens advice bureaus in Northern

Ireland were and we were also pleasantly surprised by many of the replies which were quite detailed. The most common complaints seemed to have been fax machines, slow broadband, broken internet connections, mobile phone coverage and PCs in general. The most useful technology seemed to have been broadband, mobile phones and PDA's.

Figure 10: Items of office technology found to be most frustrating

Category	Most frustrating Technology	Category	Most frustrating Technology
Citizens Advice Bureau	Spam, Auto-updates restarting PC, Slow PCs, Networking, Keyboards, Lack of Cordless Phones, Slow Broadband, Lotus Notes, Fax Machines, Mobile Phones, Printers and Ink Cartridges	Churches	Ink Cartridges, Songpro, PC, Maintaining Website, Email, Broadband going down, New features in Office 2007 and Viruses
Direct Mail & Email Marketing	Poor Broadband Service, Software upgrades, Fax, Spam, MS Word, Anti-spam software which blocks genuine, Email, Anti-spam software which fails to block improper content, Vista – for taking up huge RAM and PowerPoint	Web Design Companies	MS Internet Explorer, Apple Mice, Differing Color Displays across all monitors, Bluetooth setup, Fax, PC's, Dreamweaver poor code generation, Photoshop, Web Servers going down and Mobile Phone blackspots
Double Glazing Windows Firms	PDA, Laptop and Wireless 802.11	Politicians	Email, Mobile phone blackspots, Automatic updates restarting the PC and Quostar software

Our results lead us to conclude that there is a lack of 'intimacy' inherent in email that results in people simply 'binning' unsolicited requests for information. However we have find that people are more likely to respond to a request for information that is sent through the post with a stamped addressed envelope. While the findings of this research are unlikely to cause shockwaves in the wider public, we do believe that in certain scenarios where important information is required – then it is best to maximize ones chances and send a letter with a SAE in the hope of receiving an answer. We also believe that you are much more likely to get a reply from a Church leader or Citizens Advice Bureau than a Politician or Double Glazing Windows firm!

Conclusion

Electronic mail is becoming the most widely used form of communication, but is limited in terms of communicating. This research attempts to ascertain whether one is more likely to receive a reply to a letter containing a stamped addressed envelope than a similar email request. We conclude that one improves their chances of a response by sending a letter. In fact,

one is roughly 17% more likely to receive a response. We also believe that a handwritten letter is much more likely to receive a response also. The results provide confidence that personalized communication in the modern era outperforms the 'easier' method of email.

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