



Mar 31, 2015

## Saying What We Mean: Evidence-Driven Communication Practices

Communication: It's how we talk to each other. How we talk to clients. It can be nebulous and squishy, yet it's important and impactful. Communication is directly related to the quality of the projects we deliver, how well we meet our clients' needs, and the satisfaction we have with our work.



By [Sarah Miller](#)

**Communication:** It's how we talk to each other. How we talk to clients. It can be nebulous and squishy, yet it's important and impactful. Communication is directly related to the quality of the projects we deliver, how well we meet our clients' needs, and the satisfaction we have with our work. It informs the culture of our workplace. It makes client service firms like Blink run. Good communication means we are leaving the office with a big ol' smile at the end of the day. Bad communication? It's the worst.

So what works for us here at Blink?

For a topic like this, I didn't have all the answers. I threw out the question at our weekly Blink team meeting, grabbed a whiteboard marker, and started writing as people brainstormed. We analyzed what we've done in the past, what worked, and what clearly didn't. There would be discussion, bullet points of if-then parameters, and consensus. We talked through the high level — like how communication includes both what you say and what you do, and the nitty gritty —

like how formal we need to be in our emails (Hello, Hi, or Hey).

Communication isn't just about when it's going right. It's just as important to know when it's time to change course. Are we being inarticulate? Is there a disconnect? When are we sending the wrong signals, speaking the wrong language, jibbing the wrong jive? Did we send a one-sentence answer with a typo from a phone? No good can come of that.

Email. Phone. In-person. Carrier pigeon. Smoke signals. Modern interpretive dance. There are many ways to communicate a message. Here's what works best for us at Blink.

## Client communication

- **We never regret meeting face-to-face with our clients:** It's necessary for demos, prototypes, artifact reviews. It shows clients that they are important to us and we appreciate their time. It helps us get back on track if we've gone awry. It gives us insight into their culture, especially during the discovery phase. Final presentations are always better in person.
- **We make meeting schedules that make sense:** Just as important as having meetings is making sure we have time to produce. Schedules must be in balance and the meeting cadence should support some hardcore jam sessions so we can review materials and make the most of our time together.
- **When face-to-face can't happen, we consider other options:** Sometimes the telephone is great, especially for urgent or high-priority conversations (i.e., the prototype is broken and we have the pilot in an hour...). Telephone works well if we have one question and we're ringing the person empowered to make the decision. Sometimes we like to email quickly to see if the client has time to hop on the phone. Other times we'll use a web conferencing service. These tools are not always our favorite choice, but they are much better than "just" the phone or email to review artifacts, and can serve our clients when used judiciously.
- **The key to client email is knowing when to change communication methods:** Ideally, we use email to create a record and aid efficiency. If we have a question that we know clients will need lead time to research, we'll send an email. To confirm decisions made or keep a record, we'll shoot over a message. We'll write down and recap meeting notes and communicate next steps, so our busy clients can easily reference where we are in a project.
- **We are very aware of when we need to course-correct:** If we are replying to an email with "It depends...", if we are explaining / troubleshooting in depth, or if we feel like there is churn (back-to-back, quick replies) or miscommunication (woah, that's not what I was expecting), it's time to schedule a call, meet face-to-face, pull in a PM, or synch with Client Services.

## Blink project teams

- **Ex-nay on the Email-ay:** It's rare that we see email as essential between team members. We use it as a record to recap decisions or to communicate a high volume of detailed information. We also use it when a couple people need to know something quickly, and it doesn't make sense to have a face-to-face meeting, or we just can't seem to connect and be in the same place at the same time.
- **Face-to-face is best, formal or otherwise:** We like talking to each other in person or over the phone during projects, especially for kick-offs, brainstorming, prioritizing next steps, communicating ideas, and aligning on complicated deliverables. We like these sessions in meeting rooms, on the blue couches, at desks, and even (gasp) outside the building. Basically, we don't see a downside, except they can be difficult to schedule, at times. In those instances sometimes we have to rely on email.

- **Calling and texting is fine, if OK'd by team members:** Texting can be great to confirm logistics, especially commuting or field research. Calling, even after hours, can be a great time saver. The catch? We like to clear it with our team members first to make sure it's okay, and when people cannot talk (family time, yoga, band practice), they don't pick up.

## Blink "Bullpen" communication

We have an open office environment and have dubbed it The Bullpen.

- **We love informal chats:** No one is worried about being interrupted too much because we all feel comfortable asking a team member to swing by our desk later if we needed to focus uninterrupted for awhile. In fact, we are uncomfortable even calling them "interruptions" because they usually save us so much time in the long run. We see them as hugely valuable.
- **We like being "meeting-light:"** We like that we are not called into (general / staff) meetings. It allows us to get our work done, and our open office culture keeps us in touch, even though we're not often scheduled to be together formally.
- **We use email as a record or reference:** Money? Lab logistics? IT help desk requests? We email. Otherwise (and often concurrently), we'll walk over and discuss in person.
- **Office-wide chat could be in our future:** We don't need this now as we are all on one floor and can easily walk over and talk. As we add locations in the future as the company grows, however, we see it as an imperative addition.

Here at Blink, it's not just saying what you mean and meaning what you say — it's about building relationships and constantly working to understand our clients, our project teams, and each other. These tried and true methods serve our clients and us well. What communication practices do you rely on?

*Sarah is a member of the project management team at Blink UX, and considers good communication to be about 95% of her job. Her favorite things, in slight particular order, are her baby daughter, the smell of clean laundry, and turkish coffee.*