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# THE COMMISSIONER

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## Communications

As commissioners, one of our greatest tasks is to communicate, yet communication itself has so many facets.

If I were to prioritize what it is we need to know about communicating as commissioners, I would start with “share what you know.”

How often do you get some information that should be shared with others but you don’t? Or at least not in a timely fashion, such as news about the camporee, popcorn, or other information that will make the lives of fellow Scouters and the units they serve easier?

HOW we communicate is a function of the importance and urgency of the communication. For example, the last-minute cancellation of a troop car wash needs to be disseminated NOW and as widely as possible. In a life-or-death situation, like when you need an ambulance, would you hand-write a letter and give it to the post office or would you make a “real-time” communication (of which there are several options)?

Personal communications don’t routinely have the urgency of an ambulance call, but for a typical communication, how long is too long to respond? Years ago (before the advent of email), I was taught that under no circumstances should it take more than 24 hours to return a phone call. I think that rule is still valid—for phone calls. But what about emails—you know, those “time suckers” that fill up your day? I remember once when working in the Pentagon as an action officer that my boss told me that ALL emails had to be answered in 24 hours. Generally I try to answer all emails as soon as possible, “handling” the email only once for efficiency reasons (and so I don’t forget) and within a 24-hour period—yet it is neither always appropriate nor always possible to respond within 24 hours.

With some issues, such as which state the battleship USS Missouri was going to end up in as a donation vessel, the possibility that I could receive an email that required answering within the same 24 hours from every resident of the state of Missouri was calculable—even if the probability of it happening was extremely small. So these days, I do realize that sometimes it may take longer than 24 hours to respond. But how long is too long for a communication to go unanswered, and what do you do (on both sides of the process) when that happens? Some would say a quick 30-second response to the effect of “I’m working on it” would be the courteous thing to do, but what if after doing your triage of answering the urgent and important emails you still have more than 100 left (not unrealistic if you are a council



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commissioner in a very large council)? Taking 30 seconds each means using almost an hour to respond to what you’ve already deemed neither important nor urgent. Worse—it’s your day off or you are on a family holiday. I know, it’s a volunteer “job” so it’s really full pay (zero) with a 24/7 expectation.

If you are looking for some “iron-clad” etiquette rule of thumb on how long is too long to respond to an email, I’m sorry that I cannot provide one. After reading dozens of current treatises on the topic, I found that not one author ventured an answer to that question. What I can tell you is that if you are the author of an email and you want a response, there are some unwritten email rules that you might want to look at, such as <https://www.themuse.com/advice/finally-the-23-unwritten-rules-of-email>.

My best suggestion if you are the author and you really, really want or need a response: Write about only one issue—identified in the subject line—and keep it concise (unlike this article).

One method the National Commissioner Task Force and Support Staff uses to communicate with commissioners is social media. We routinely use three Facebook accounts, LinkedIn, and a Yahoo Group—yet with these five methods of communicating, we don’t know what percentage of the intended audience we are reaching.



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The problem with some of these methods of real-time communications is that they are one-way, i.e., you don't know if the message was received, and in some cases you don't even know who received the message.

So quite by accident we've already introduced the two broad categories into which every form of communication can be grouped—"real time" and not. Within each broad category there are several options. For example, a face-to-face, or video/ telephonic, verbal conversation is clearly "real time"—as are Morse code by flashing light and, more realistically, a text message or tweet. And then there are sub-options, such as Facebook's Messenger or WhatsApp, which also has a voice option using VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol). Further, we've discovered that some *potentially* "real-time" communications can inadvertently become "non-real-time" communications—which actually can become an advantage. One major advantage of non-real-time communications is that they generally are "permanent" and they can be easily referenced when a point needs to be reviewed or confirmed.

Have you discovered that the people you need to communicate with have different personal preferences, with some using regular text messaging, while others avoid traditional text messaging but use WhatsApp or Messenger? When dealing with large groups of people, I have never found one single method of communicating to be 100 percent effective. The larger the group, the greater the likelihood that in order to maximize the probability of your communication being received you will have to use a greater number of methods simultaneously to disseminate your message.

The most common non-real-time communication form that I think I can say all of us are familiar with has already been discussed—emails. One major advantage of email is that you can include attachments. Those attachments can be anything from a Commissioner Tools Power Pivot table .xlsm file to photographs and documents with both text and photos. One suggestion when sending text documents, including fliers for events, is to try sending them as PDF files because it is the one file type that most people have the ability to open on their computer, tablet, or handheld device. (If you can't open these types of files, a quick internet search will find several versions of free software that will allow you to both create and edit PDF files.)

But even in 2017, not everyone uses email, so occasionally we need to use other means to communicate, such as "snail mail." Today snail mail has some distinct advantages, such as the excitement it generates when we receive it (with the possible exception of junk mail). The old suggestion to send postcards inviting unit leaders to roundtables is still effective, especially if you can time them to arrive 24 to 48 hours in advance of the roundtable so they can also serve as reminders. Have you ever had a difficult time confirming that someone received your communication? They won't return your phone calls or emails, and perhaps you've even stopped by their house and, as in a scene from a movie, the lights are on inside and you see a curtain being pulled back slightly yet nobody answers the door? This is when the U.S. Postal Service can help with multiple solutions, with everything from registered and certified mail to restricted delivery and return receipt mail.

Finally, this article would not be complete if I didn't acknowledge the fact that we can also communicate with the written word in non-real time through the use of various periodicals and newsletters such as *The Commissioner*.

Summarizing, as a commissioner, one of our greatest tasks and responsibilities is communicating, but depending on a number of variables, deciding HOW we communicate requires us to weigh:

1. The urgency of the message against the size of the audience
2. The importance of the topic along with whether we need to confirm receipt of the message
3. The necessary reach (how many people need to receive this message)
4. The desired response to the message

While I was doing research to write this article, I thought I would look to see if there was a "communication matrix" that summarized the various forms of communications discussed in this article. I couldn't find what I needed so I created my own matrix (at the right), which is just a summary of the types of communications discussed in this article.

Type	Urgent	Major Pros	Major Cons
<b>Voice</b>	Y and N	<b>The best way to communicate when urgent.</b> Can provide instant confirmation and feedback.	Hard to document.
<b>Email</b>	N	Can send to many at once. <b>Can include attachments.</b>	Hard to confirm receipt.
<b>Social media</b>	Y and N	Can reach huge audiences rapidly.	Hard to confirm receipt.
<b>Text and other "instant" messaging</b>	Y	FAST	Best if limited to very short messages.
<b>Twitter</b>	Y	Fast, short messages.	One-way communication that may be ambiguous due to brevity.
<b>"Snail mail"</b>	N	<b>Usually not ignored.</b>	Slow.
<b>Print media</b>	N	Can reach a very large audience at once. Has "permanence."	Slow. Cost can become a factor.

