

Features

Everything You Know is Already Out of Date

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The Internet has brought unprecedented changes to the way we work and live—email, Googling, eBay, Amazon, instantaneous access to the news. We

are now at a point where we are beginning to achieve critical mass (there are, as of January 2006, a billion people on the Internet) and the changes that the Internet is bringing to our lives are, if anything, coming at an increasingly faster rate.

We are now in the era of “Web 2.0.” Web 1.0 was when every site was like an ad, flat and static, updated by one person or a limited team. Now, in the era of “Web 2.0,” things are becoming more dynamic. We’re seeing a lot more interactivity, and a lot more many-to-many communications. Everyone is a potential web publisher; everyone is a potential contributor to the dialogue that is happening online. This massive interactivity, in real time, around the clock, has real implications for the way we communicate with our clients and market our services. How does the immediacy of an emailed proposal change the client relationship? How does the fact that your client is reading your blog change how you relate as professionals?

Here are four ideas about how the facts of life, work, and professional communications are changing:

1. You can find out anything about your clients—and your clients can find out anything about you.

Everybody Googles. There’s a well-known cartoon by Peter Steiner that appeared in the *New Yorker* (July 5, 1993) with two dogs sitting at a computer. One dog says to the other, “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.” Today, using the Internet, anybody can find out if you’re a dog, or if you’re the leader in your profession, or if you’ve ever been arrested, or if you bought a house recently. The Internet has moved from an anonymous

communications medium to a venue that is hyper-public, and recorded in perpetuity. A recent *BusinessWeek* article reported on prospective employers Googling job applicants, and finding quite a bit revealed on sites like MySpace.com. We all have a lot more information about each other at our fingertips than we used to, but what we do with it, and how it changes how we relate as professionals, is an open question.

2. People are talking—about everything—including you.

There is an incredible amount of chatter on the Internet. On blogs and in forums, users post on every topic imaginable—reviewing their new digital camera, sharing advice or personal anecdotes, complaining about an employer or a service provider. There’s an old adage in marketing that if a customer is happy, they’ll tell two people about you, but if they’re not happy, they’ll tell nine people about you. Today, if you provide service that a client is not happy with, the client could easily tell thousands of people. It’s more important than ever to manage all of your relationships carefully—with clients, employees, partners, consultants. To check out the kinds of chatter that are happening online in our industry check out the Gutter, the design-gossip page of the *Curbed* real estate blog. The forums in *Archinect* can get a little saucy, too.

3. People are sharing—a lot.

One of the most positive things about the Internet is the amount of collaboration and knowledge-sharing that is taking place. Wikipedia is quickly becoming the best source in the world for information on anything; however, since the articles are written by an army of volunteers, you sometimes need to provide your own reality-check to the information you find there. Programmers utilize the Internet to work collaboratively on open source software—such as Linux or OpenOffice, a free, open source Microsoft Office clone. People want to participate, be a part of building something, and be recognized for it. All companies would

be served by learning to harness the passion of their customers (think about the way that Amazon allows any customer to write a review of any product in its catalog) or their employees (Google gives every employee one day a week to work on innovative personal projects) to support the success of the company.

4. How soon is ASAP? How fast is too fast?

Wherever you are, your client can reach you. You’ve got a mobile phone. You can check your email. You can respond to a request by emailing a PDF file of a plan or a rendering or a contract. In this entirely digital, mobile-enabled, always-on world, what’s to stop you from responding instantly to any communication, any request from any client, at any hour, from any location? Well, you just can’t work like that, right? Sometimes you need to turn the computer off, let the phone go to voice mail, and leave the Blackberry in the next room. But determining the parameters of when you are on and when you are off is getting harder all the time.

There’s so much change underway in the way we communicate, it’s tempting to make overbroad statements like, “It’s all changing!” But, in fact, it isn’t. We are riding an accelerating parabola of change, but what this means is that essentials are as important as ever. People do still hire people, so building personal relationships with clients based on trust and mutual respect is still the most important thing to do to build business. The Internet doesn’t change that—it just provides a new landscape in which to do it, with new rules and new challenges.

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