Sales Effectiveness:
Traditional & Computer-Mediated Communication Modalities Compared

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The proliferation of computer-based communication technologies has altered the way individuals communicate with each other. Technologies such as emailing, texting and online social networking has replaced or significantly supplemented more traditional forms of communication such as letter writing and face-to-face conversations across all age groups. For example, texting is now the primary form of communication among teenagers (Jones, 2012) and the use of online social media has grown dramatically among older adults (Madden, 2010). Frequency of use statistics for the web show that social media has now displaced pornography as the most frequent web based activity (Qualman, 2012).

The use of social media, generally defined as internet-based applications allowing the creation and exchange of user generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), is projected to become a primary tool for generating business leads and increasing sales (Thé, 2011; Lewis, 2012). Previous methods for identifying, locating and contacting prospective clients has been described as random and inefficient (Coyle, 2012*).*

In a similar context, online technologies have essentially replaced decades of conventional paper-and-pencil psychological testing, often without first examining the effect of mode of administration on response behaviors such as social desirability, acquiescence and other issues associated with compliance and standardization (Burke & Normand, 1987; Donovan, Drasgow, & Probst, 2000). A parallel rush to integrate gains in communication technology into sales orientated applications may be equally problematic. Today, computer-based communications technologies such as Facebook[®], LinkedIn[®], texting, emailing and instant messaging are being rapidly deployed by sales and marketing organizations before sufficient programmatic research data has been obtained to provide empirical justification, identify peripheral concerns and gauge salesperson perceptions of utility.

This study compares the perceived job-related effectiveness of computer-based social contact technologies with traditional forms of communication. Specifically, the study compares the relative effectiveness of communication media used by sales professionals engaged in clientele-building activities.

Effective selling requires effective communication which, according to *media richness theory* (MRT), depends largely on the functional capabilities of the communication medium utilized (Maruping & Agarwal, 2004). A key aspect of this theory, *richness*, refers to the capability of

communication media to support the exchange of information (conveyance) to reduce uncertainty and produce understanding or agreement (convergence) within a given time interval (Hertel, Schroer, Batinic, & Naumann, 2008)— such as agreement by a client to purchase a product or service. The concept of "media richness", as further defined by the *media synchronicity theory,* refers to various functionalities of a given communication medium (Maruping & Agarwal, 2004). Key functionalities include synchronous (real-time) communication versus asynchronous (delayed time) communication, and the amount of information that is transferrable during a given time interval (Hertel et al., 2004; Romiszowski & Mason, 2004). For example, oral communication is considered high in richness because it is characterized by the immediacy of feedback and therefore relatively higher amounts of information are transferable during a given timeframe. By comparison, asynchronous forms of written or text-based communication have a relatively lower level of richness because more time is required for communication exchange. Research has also found that individuals preferring asynchronous forms of written communication, i.e., those that allow more time to analyze and control informational content, tend to have higher levels of social anxiety (Hertel et al., 2004).

In the current study, we hypothesize that traditional forms of oral communication will be considered more effective by sales professionals engaged in building or expanding their clientele base. We also theorize that individuals hesitant to initiate first contact with prospective buyers, a condition referred to as *sales call reluctance* (Dudley & Goodson, 1986), are more likely to prefer the newer asynchronous forms of communication.

Method
Data for the first study was obtained from 4,768 adult, direct salespeople across more than 1,000 companies and a wide range of U.S. industries. This sample was comprised of approximately 67% males and 33% females, with an estimated average age of 40.[1] Each participant completed the Sales Preference Questionnaire (SPQ*GOLD®) a limited-purpose diagnostic instrument specifically designed to assess clientele-building activity in salespeople (Dudley & Goodson, 1990). The SPQ includes scales for twelve behaviorally distinct patterns of sales call reluctance and a comprehensive summary measure of sales call reluctance, the *Prospecting Brake Scale*. Participants in the study were also surveyed to indicate which form of client communication media was most effective in helping them generate new sales.

Results
Approximately 70% (+/- 1% SE) of the salespeople surveyed indicated that traditional forms of communication (face-to-face contact or phone contact) were most effective for generating new sales. Approximately 10% (+/- .14% SE) said email communication was most effective. Less than 10% found other forms of communication to be most effective (Figure 1).

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[1] There were 249 participants who did not indicate their age and 8 participants did not indicate gender.

Further analyses found that salespeople considering asynchronous forms of communication most effective, have slightly elevated levels of inhibited contact inhibition across 11 of the 12 forms of sales call reluctance measured by SPQ (Dudley & Goodson, 2007), (Figure 2).

Replication and Extension
Similar results were obtained in a follow-up survey comparing the effectiveness of social media websites verses traditional modes of communication for generating new sales. Approximately 68% (+/- 1.74% SE) of salespeople indicated that utilizing direct forms of communication were most effective when selling. By comparison, 12.1% (+/- .29% SE) found email communication to be most effective and only 2.8% (+/- .05% SE) said sales contact via social media sites was most effective when selling. Approximately 10% or less found other forms of communication to be most effective. Results were independent of age groups (X^2=15.65, p=.074). There were 1512 salespeople in this study (64% males, 36% females, estimated average age of 40[2]).

Conclusion
In recent decades there has been an increased use of computer-mediated technologies in sales and marketing settings The current study examines whether traditional or computer-mediated forms of sales contact initiation are considered more effective by sales professionals. The results suggest that the majority of salespeople still find traditional forms of oral communication most effective when establishing or expanding a client base, thus, providing support for the research hypothesis. Further, the results are consistent with the media synchronicity theory which considers oral forms of communication to be more effective due to the immediacy of feedback which allows for a relatively higher degree of information exchange during a given timeframe.

Salespeople who considered asynchronous text-based forms of communication more effective, also tended to have higher levels of sales call reluctance which may be reflected in their preference to avoid more traditional forms of face-to-face or voice-to-voice prospecting. This is consistent with the relationship hypothesized by previous research studies linking preference for text-based communication with higher levels of social anxiety. These results were replicated in an extended follow-up study that also examined the effectiveness of building a clientele base via contact through social media websites.

Overall, this research suggests that although computer mediated technologies may help expand the range of communications with prospective buyers, such technology does not necessarily translate to increased sales effectiveness, and may instead function in some cases as a means of escape and avoidance for salespeople coping with emotional discomfort associated with client-building activities.

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[2] There were 74 participants who did not indicate their age and 2 participants did not indicate gender.
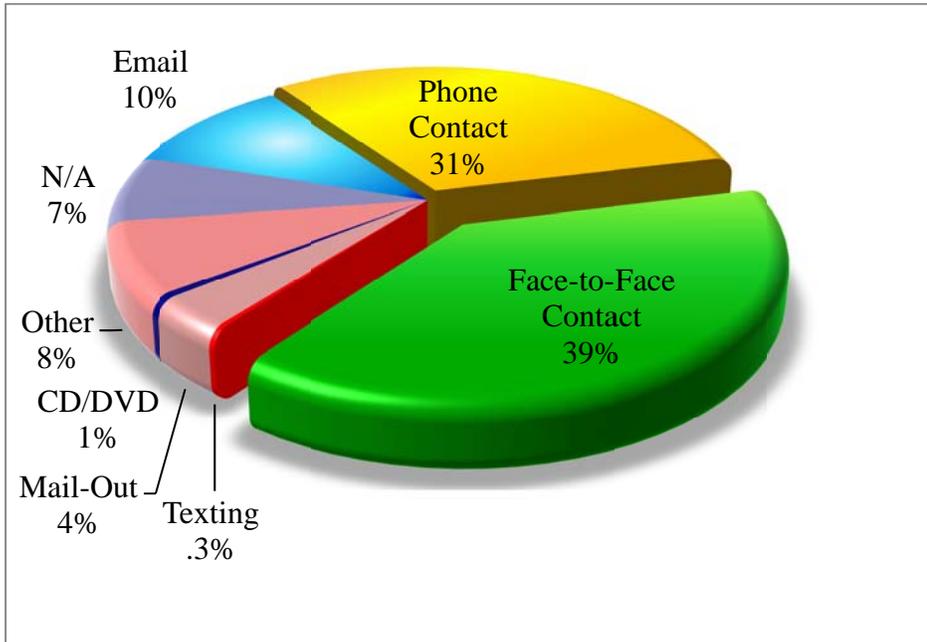
Figure 1. Forms of communication media considered as most effective in generating new sales.
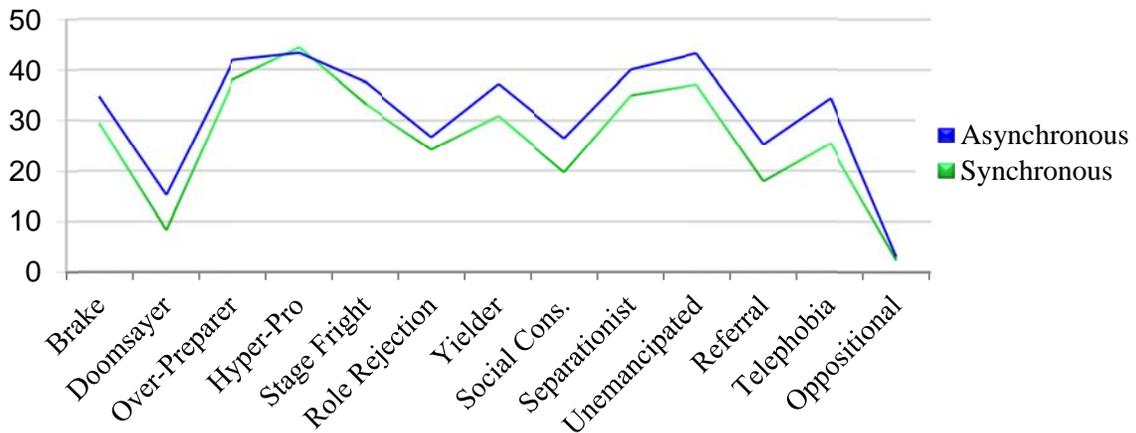

Figure 2. Comparison of sales call reluctance profiles between individuals who consider asynchronous verses synchronous modes of communication to be most effective.

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