

Message over Medium: Modern Communication in the Family Business

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As the platform for modern communication has radically changed over the past decade, there have been countless articles and opinions offered on “how” to best reach your audience, in particular a younger audience. A whole new set of communication verbs and nouns have emerged in our vocabulary: “blogging,” “social networking,” and “tweeting” that are a testimony to the changing landscape of information delivery. Yet, while we clearly need to understand HOW to use these new vehicles of information delivery, there seems to be less thought or discussion around WHAT we are actually saying to one another. What seems to have been lost in the discussion about ‘medium,’ is some renewed thought on the message.

Message is particularly important in a family business. “Who we are, and what we stand for” is often the key differentiator and competitive advantage of a family enterprise. As you think about the message you are crafting for your customers, ensure that no matter what platform you use to communicate – the essence of “who” you are is not lost in translation. This is not to suggest that your business identity needs to stay stuck in the age of the dinosaur – family business brands and identities (like those of any company) do well to evolve and stay current with the times. However, if your clients perceive value in the “personal touch” of your company, you want to be sure that any new communication platform you embrace will not “take that away” from your customer’s experience. The point is not to get so distracted by the rush to jump onto the latest platform, or message system, that the communication you put out there is inauthentic to your business.

In addition to communicating with customers, families that are in business together need to communicate with

one another on a regular basis – and many are making use of more contemporary methods. Increasingly we see families setting up “Facebook” pages, or “Yahoo groups” to share information and encourage the involvement of the younger generation. Some families have set up blogs to journal a family member’s or the company’s activities. While one could imagine how more channels of communication might facilitate the flow of information, it is also true that these additional channels can provide more opportunities for miscommunication – especially if they are used to deliver the wrong message.

Given the emotional load of both business and family issues, communication is a struggle for many family enterprises. Even just on family matters, different communication “norms” (for example, notions of confidentiality) that might be found between the generations is a source of problems. In fact, poor communication is the undoing of many otherwise strong family businesses – and has often also spelled the demise of family unity. Yet, the worst kind of communication is no communication – so this represents a challenge: we want to maximize the flow of information and communication, but we must be mindful of communicating in a productive and healthy manner. What to do?

1. Assume good intentions. Language is limited, no matter what the platform. When you are reading or listening to communication from a family member, assume they mean well and not harm. Not everyone is a skilled communicator and it is easy to be misunderstood, so it is important to actively seek the most positive spin you can put on a communication.
2. Be straightforward. No one likes to feel someone is trying to keep important information away from

them – and the younger generation is particularly sensitive to this. If there is information you cannot share, or that should not be communicated through a particular medium, simply state this and explain why. It is reasonable to indicate that financial results should not be shared via email (who knows where that information can end up) – but you must then clarify how or when this information will be made available.

3. Understand the protocol. Different platforms of communication have different ‘norms.’ For example, if you use CAPITAL letters in an email, the ‘norm’ says you are yelling. Be sure that when you use a given communication tool you have good knowledge of how your message can be ‘heard’ or interpreted on this platform.
4. Be authentic. This comes back to the “flavor” of the message. When communicating with clients, ensure the personality of your business is shining through, no matter what platform you use.
5. Have tone fit the message. When communicating with family, the “tone” or flavor of the message should vary depending on the content you are communicating. There are some messages that should be delivered with a sense of professionalism – information about the company, minutes from a Board meeting, etc. Yet, when communicating about the annual family BBQ, that message should not be formal or it will be experienced as cold.
6. Clarify norms and expectations. It is important that everyone who will receive a communication understand what they are expected to do or not do with this information. If a reply or response is required, the family should establish norms around

how fast responses are expected – some people feel a 3 day delay is fine, whereas others perceive anything longer than 24 hours to be rude. Likewise, when information is sensitive, or should not be shared with others, it is important to explicitly clarify (especially to the younger generation) what this means.

7. Don’t sacrifice the human touch. While modern technologies can allow us to “feel” more connected, and certainly facilitate the frequency of communication – electronic platforms should NEVER replace face-to-face interactions. If you work down the hallway from your sister, walk over there to chat rather than send an email every time. Do not get so seduced by the facility of information exchange and light communication via technology that you forgo regular family meetings, shared vacations, or other opportunities to more deeply reconnect with your family.

This challenge of modern communication is an example of a paradox we often encounter in family business: the tension of the old versus the new. We want to be able to stay current and embrace new technologies in ways that will be to our advantage, but we need to be mindful of valued traditions or the “old way” of doing things that may continue to have some currency, and should not be discarded lightly. Certainly the human touch and close connections of family are a vital ingredient in family business success – while you should embrace all the communication technologies that will help you in the business, don’t let these technologies damage the positive “family feel” for your clients or your family!

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