1 Stuffed with information and starved for attention

IT MAY SEEM INCREDIBLE, but the information age is only about 25 years old. Today we can barely remember a time before personal computers, PDAs (personal digital assistants), digital cable, TiVo, iPods, camera cellphones, and all the other devices that bring us a constant and unending flood of data. But, in fact, all of these are younger than the 29-year-old in the next cubicle, who’s spending his lunch hour playing online poker.

In the golden age before all this stuff made us both very entertained and very overwhelmed, people actually welcomed and treasured communication.

Back then:
- In the morning, folks lingered over the daily newspaper. In the evening, they watched their favorite network television shows, getting up only to change the channel.
- At work, people paid careful attention to the memos, reports, and publications delivered to their inboxes.
- As customers, they were interested in ads, direct mailers, and other information that could entertain them or help them make a decision.

Why don’t people pay attention to your communication? Because, as this chapter explains, they’re overloaded with information—so overwhelmed that they’ve lost their ability to focus.

People used to welcome and treasure communication.
In general, people were patient, tolerant, and even passive when it came to communication. They were busy, for sure, but they had the time to listen, to read, and to absorb. And then on June 1, 1980, it all began to unravel.

That was the day CNN went on the air, and its access and immediacy (“Do you mean I can turn on the TV at 3:00 in the morning and find out what’s going on anywhere in the world?”) was the beginning of a communication revolution.

More, more, more

All these communication channels have created a mind-boggling volume of information—so much so, in fact, that analysts have to use measures of data like “terabytes” (1,000,000,000,000 bytes).

For example, according to the School of Information Management and Systems at the University of California at Berkeley:

- The Internet contains about 170 terabytes of information, which is 17 times more information than the Library of Congress print collections.
- In 2002, more than 31 billion e-mails were sent every day; by 2006, that volume is expected to double. E-mail generates about 400,000 terabytes of new information every year. (A typical academic research library contains about 2 terabytes of information.)
- There are about 5 billion instant messages per day, or 274 terabytes a year. (In the United States, 53 million people—4 in 10—use instant messaging, according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, a nonprofit research organization.)
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Why it changed the way we experience communication</th>
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<td>1980</td>
<td>CNN is launched, introducing 24-hour-a-day news coverage.</td>
<td>Provides first access to events as they occur: Watch it live, don’t read or hear about it later Creates universal experience (CNN is now available in 86% of American households).</td>
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<td>1981</td>
<td>MTV debuts (with Video Killed The Radio Star).</td>
<td>Changes music, demonstrates that TV can be fun: ▶ Fast-moving ▶ Cool, hip ▶ Visual</td>
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<td>1982</td>
<td><em>USA Today</em> introduced.</td>
<td>Sets new standard for newspapers: ▶ Colorful ▶ Easy, predictable navigation ▶ Short, snappy copy ▶ Reader-oriented; “consumer-y”</td>
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<td>1984</td>
<td>Internet domain name system established. Today 74% of Americans use the Internet an average of 11.1 hours per week. Most popular activities: ▶ Web surfing (76%) ▶ Reading news (51%) ▶ Entertainment (46%) ▶ Shopping (44%)</td>
<td>Communication expectations are changed forever: ▶ All doors are open—to information, products, services ▶ Users control the experience. You can get a little information, a lot, or anything in between ▶ “Reading” on screen = skimming</td>
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<td>1989</td>
<td>Electronic Arts launches the “Madden NFL Football” video game, the first realistic sports game. By 2003, more than 30 million copies were sold.</td>
<td>Consumers are not watching the game; they’re playing the game: ▶ Americans spent more time in 2003 playing video games—about 75 hours on average—than on watching rented videos and DVDs ▶ Average gamer is 29 years old; 44% female</td>
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<td>1996</td>
<td>Instant messaging introduced. Today: ▶ 90% of 13- to 21-year olds instant message ▶ 43% of workers use instant messaging on the job</td>
<td>Communication as conversation: ▶ Writing or talking? (Are they the same thing?)</td>
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The largest electronic channel for communication is the telephone: landlines and mobile phones. 98 percent of all information transmitted electronically occurs by phone.

**Dead trees**
Lest you think the information explosion is all digital, read facts from the old-fashioned world of print communication:

- A typical issue of the *New York Times* contains more information than the average person in the seventeenth century was likely to encounter during his entire lifetime.
- There were 18,821 magazines published in 2004, with a total of 156,586 pages of editorial content (including 23,766 pages devoted to celebrities, 10,364 to business, and 2,216 to consumer electronics).

**You’ve got mail**

**Americans have a love/hate relationship with e-mail.** On the one hand, we’re addicted to it, saying that we rely on e-mail as much as we do on the telephone for communication and spending about an hour a day reading and writing e-mail, according to a study conducted by Opinion Research Corporation. Forty-one percent of Americans check their e-mail first thing in the morning, and 40 percent have checked their e-mail in the middle of the night.

But people find the volume of e-mail overwhelming, especially when it comes to unsolicited e-mail like spam. According to Pew, 70 percent of e-mail users say spam has made being online unpleasant or annoying, and 75 percent say they are bothered that they can’t stop the flow of spam.

Still, no matter how annoying your problem is, you can take comfort in the fact that it’s not as bad as the overload suffered by Bill Gates, the chairman of Microsoft Corporation. Mr. Gates receives 4 million e-mails per day, most of them spam.
“What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.”

*Herbert Simon, the late Nobel laureate economist*