



Is Anybody out there?

by Robert M. Gignac

“You’ve reached the offices of McGillicuty and Smith, our regular office hours are 9:00 am to 5:00 pm Monday to Friday...”

You have no idea how many times I have heard that message, or a variation on it, in the past year. I have just celebrated the first anniversary of my two-year relocation to Switzerland, and since I have spent the last 12 months “working from afar” of my primary client market, I thought I would share some insights on the process with you.

When the decision was made to accept the assignment, I thought (perhaps naïvely) that continuing to run my business back in Canada from across the ocean would not be that much of a problem. After all, we have great communication tools at our disposal – e-mail, Web sites, voicemail, cell phones and, in a pinch, overnight couriers for urgent things that just have to be there tomorrow.

The reality has turned out to be a little different than I expected. The first and most important issue is learning to work with the six-hour time zone difference from Switzerland to Toronto (five hours to Nova Scotia, nine hours to British Columbia). It is key to being successful when working from afar. As a speaker and author who needs to talk to people on a constant basis – for both marketing my

services and research – the daily window is short for person-to-person conversation.

As such, I have built my schedule around a 3:00 pm to 6:00 pm window (9:00 am-Noon in Toronto) for making primary contacts by telephone – the early portion of my day is used for Internet research, e-mail, and leaving voicemail messages.

There are pros and cons to this setup, the first of which is that you have to be dedicated to the routine, and stick with it. Why? Because when you are working from a long distance – it really can be “out of sight, out of mind”. In order to stay “top of mind” with your clients and prospects, you require a consistent, dedicated approach to staying in contact. It also means that when a key client wants to set up a call at 9:00 pm Toronto time, I have to get out of bed at 3:00 am to make the call.

The second is that while e-mail is a quick and convenient tool, and much more cost effective than international phone calls, it has some drawbacks. First, with the amount of spam and junk e-mail clogging inboxes, it is easy for e-mail to be overlooked in the process. Second, depending on your business, keywords that you may use in your e-mail may trigger spam-blocking software and your e-mails may never get to the intended recipient. Third, e-mail lacks the ability to convey a sense of personal conviction or emphasis that is often clear when speaking to clients. In the same way, it often does not accurately allow us to gauge the reactions of the readers.

As for the telephone, this is an area where technology really can help. Since the choice to relocate was mine, I cannot expect my clients to phone Switzerland every time they want to speak with me. I have kept my business phone in Toronto, and using Bell Canada’s “Single Number Reach” technology (snr.bell.ca), whenever someone calls my number and leaves a message, the SNR system generates an e-mail, which is sent immediately to me in Switzerland. I can log into the SNR Web site and listen to my messages via the Internet within minutes of the message being left. I can then respond to the message via a phone call or e-mail in order to make sure that I stay on top of my client’s questions, inquiries, and concerns. I also have the option of setting it up to forward the calls to Switzerland; in this way, I pick up the long-distance charges, not my client.

One of my key learning processes during my time away, thus far, is that my communication skills need to be further developed. That probably sounds strange given I speak to companies and organizations for a living. However, when the majority of communication is occurring via voicemail and e-mail, one has to ensure the messages are very succinct, factual, and encourages your clients and prospects to action. While this is also very important in face-to-face communication, it is extremely important when your message is being delivered in a non-interactive medium such as voicemail or e-mail.

If you are contemplating working from afar, take some time to consider the issues surrounding the communication with your clients; how you will manage your time; and how you will create a routine that works for you. The answer to the question, “Is anybody out there?” is in fact “Yes” – the key to your success will be choosing the right method to reach them. ■

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