
Connecting and Communicating Effectively with Teens - An Online Survey of Teen Communication Styles

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Abstract: The lives of most teens are rapidly changing and involve methods of communication that are unfamiliar to many adults. An online teen communication survey was developed to assess how and why teens communicate in order to assist adult educators in developing more effective methods of communication with this audience. The survey was completed by 148 teens ranging in age from 13 to 19. The results of the survey provide insight into teen viewpoints on their preferred methods of communication and provides valuable lessons for adults who work with this age group.

Introduction

Today's American teens live in a world enveloped by communications technologies; the internet and cell phones have become a central force that fuels the rhythm of daily life (Lehnart, Hilton & Madden, 2005). The lives of most teens are rapidly changing and involves various methods of communication that are unfamiliar to many adults. Technology has become the norm in communication for teens as text messaging, instant messaging and sharing of information on social networking sites rivals inperson communication (Bovitz, 2007).

Research shows that e-mail continues to lose its luster among teens as other methods of communication become more popular for this age group. (Lehnart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007). To teens, email is increasingly seen as a tool for communicating with "adults," such as teachers, schools and other institutions, and as a way to convey lengthy and detailed information to large groups. (Lehnart, Hilton and Madden, 2005). Meanwhile, instant messaging is used for everyday conversations with multiple friends that range from casual to more serious and private exchanges (Lehnart, et al., 2005). This finding indicates a potential disconnect between teens and adults, as teachers and youth educators primarily use e-mail as a method of communication.

Current research shows that approximately 93% of teens use the internet and more of them than ever are treating it as a venue for social interaction – a place where they can share creations, tell stories and interact with others (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill & Smith, 2007). Online social networking is now so deeply embedded in the lifestyles of teens and tweens that it rivals television for their attention (National School Boards Association, 2007).

Adults who work with youth need to be aware of the “hows and whys” of teen communication and be familiar with the many different methods by which they communicate. For teens, social networking, text messaging and instant messaging are the norm. A “connected” adult can work more effectively with teens and help them make proper online decisions as well as help them become better offline communicators.

Study Rationale

Beginning in late 2006, 4-H educators in New Jersey indicated increasing difficulty in maintaining consistent communication with teens in their programs. E-mail was becoming less effective as a tool for communication as increasing numbers of teens indicated that they did not regularly check their e-mail. This communication disconnect led to information on events and teen opportunities being missed and some frustration on the part of the adults. Educators also noticed a great increase in the number of teens who had cell phones and a much greater reliance on text messaging. Some educators indicated that teens disrupted meetings and events due to constant text messaging with other teens, including others who were in the room with them. A new language was also being developed and used by teens for this type of communication, and was carrying over into the work they did on written applications and record keeping in the 4-H program.

Most adult educators did not understand the reasons behind this strong shift in communication styles. As a result, an online teen communication survey was developed to not only assess how teens involved in the program were communicating, but why. The purpose was to assist 4-H youth educators with developing more effective methods of communication with teens in the 4-H program and to provide information for parents of these teens.

Survey Design and Distribution

The survey was designed with the assistance of 4-H teens who helped to develop questions that would appeal to high school aged teens. The survey aimed to assess teens’ preferred methods of communication (in person, phone, text messaging, instant messaging and social networking), their perceptions on how effectively teens communicate both in person and online, and their feelings on social networking sites. Survey Monkey was used as the vehicle to distribute the study.

The link to the survey was first shared with 4-H educators in New Jersey. They distributed the survey by sharing the link with teens at 4-H meetings or via e-mail. Some 4-H teens also assisted with distribution of the link to the survey by sharing information with their friends through social networking sites. The survey was then shared with 4-H professionals in other states through seminars presented on teen communication at the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents and the Children, Youth and Families at Risk Conferences 2007 and 2008.

The survey results collected were confidential and did not provide a link to e-mail addresses or personal information. The survey only asked questions on the age and state of residence and any of the questions could be skipped if the respondent was uncomfortable with the content of the question.

Results

The survey was completed by 148 teens, 111 from various counties in New Jersey, 8 from Kansas and 29 from Kentucky. Youth taking the survey ranged in aged from 13 through 19. Almost 30% of teens responding did not indicate their exact age. Although the survey was confidential, the lack of response to this question could be due to the fact that many teens did not want to connect their age with whether or not they were utilizing social networking sites.

Communication Methods

Teens indicated that they utilize a variety of methods for communication. This is supported by current research which labels these youth as “multi-channel” teens (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007). These teens can talk to friends via text messaging, instant messaging and posting comments on social networking sites all at the same time.

Table 1

Teen Reported Methods of Communication. N=148

	Utilize this Method	Is the Primary Method for Communication *
Talking on the Phone	95.9% (142)	33.6% (49)
Text Messaging	74.3% (110)	32.9% (48)
Instant Messaging	64.9% (96)	15.8% (23)
E-mail	78.4% (116)	4.8% (7)
My Space	45.9% (68)	4.1% (6)
Facebook	33.8% (50)	8.9% (13)

** two respondents skipped this question*

Online vs. In Person Communication

When asked about online communication, the majority of teens (45.9%) indicated that they spend between one and three hours communicating with others each day, while 37.8% spent an hour or less, and 14.2% spent between three and five hours online.

Almost two-thirds (60.8%) indicated that they feel more comfortable communicating in person, while approximately one-third (39.2%) reported that they were more comfortable communicating online or by text messaging. When asked why, responses were varied, but followed two themes: in-person communication is more sincere, and online/text messaging can help some teens feel more confident initiating conversation or approaching an uncomfortable subject.

- “It’s hard to understand exactly what a person means through texting ... when you are face to face you can see their expressions and know exactly what they mean.”
- “People online aren’t always who they say they are.”

- "(Online/texting) gives me more time to think out what I want to say and if I'm scared to ask someone I might feel more comfortable asking them through those means."

Survey respondents were also asked whether they feel teens are able to communicate effectively in person. This question was included to determine whether teens felt that the popularity of text messaging and online communication had any affect on teens' in- person communication skills. Almost 70% felt teens were effective in-person communicators, while 30% said they were not, with comments as follows:

- "Teens are people. Everybody has times when they can't communicate, but it depends on the person, not the age."
- "Although teens rely on the internet for nearly everything, friendships can't survive without seeing someone, this forces people to be able to communicate without a computer."
- "I feel that the art of talking to someone face to face has decreased, but it is not a total loss."
- "People aren't used to talking in person, how to respond to things on their toes, without having a computer to hide behind."

When asked if online communication or text messaging has ever caused a problem for teens, only 35% said yes. These teens indicated that the primary reason for problems resulted from a lack of understanding or lack of interpretation of the true meaning of an online or text message. Teens indicated that "sometimes words can be misconstrued because you can't say them the way you mean them when they are typed."

Social Networking Sites

Over two-thirds of teens responding did participate in social networking on popular sites such as MySpace and Facebook, which follows trends shown by current research.

Table 2
Teen Responses to Utilization of Social Networking Sites, N=148

Question	Yes	No	No answer
Do you have a MySpace or Facebook page?	69.4% (102)	30.6% (45)	1
If you have a MySpace or Facebook page, are your parents aware of it?	80.5% (95)	19.5% (23)	30
Do you care if your parents know what is on your page on these sites?	16.3% (20)	83.7% (103)	25

Most teens who answered "no" to the first question did not answer the second and third questions. When teens were asked for their opinions on these social networking sites and whether they would want their parents to view what they posted, the comments were varied such as:

- "It's not that I put anything bad on it, but them checking up is a sign of distrust."

- “You act differently around different groups and people. My online pages are who I am around my friends. I’m not going to create a page based on the personality I have around my parents, but the personality I have around everyone else.”
- “In my eyes if they are good parents they should care if you have one with all the random scary people that can be on the internet.
- “I want them to know what is on there. I want them to trust me and I don’t want them to think I am hiding anything from them.”

Conclusions and Implications for Youth Development Professional

The study provides many implications for adult educators working with teens. Adults need to understand that online communication, text messaging and social networking are the norm for teens and that these types of communication are “here to stay.” The technologies may change but the need to communicate online and instantaneously will not. The following are suggestions for adults who work with teens:

- Be familiar with the methods teens use to communicate with their friends. Adults do not need to develop their own MySpace or Facebook page, but should be well aware of the positive and negative aspects of these sites.
- Develop expectations for teens at meetings and events. In many instances, talking during meetings is now replaced with text messaging during meetings. Be sure that the same behavior standards are being used regardless of the method of communication.
- Make teens aware of the consequences of sharing too much information or posting inappropriate comments or photos in a public domain. Teens may indicate that they never communicate with people they don’t know online, but some will post their complete address and cell phone number, without understanding the implications of sharing all of this personal information. Teens may also provide through their “online status” a description of where they are such as, “at the mall from 6-9 then at Julie’s house.” These online safety issues can be addressed by adults or older teens through group or individual discussions. Teens also need to be made aware that they can be judged by information posted by their friends. A potential employer or college can make assumptions on a teen’s values based not only on what they post but the comments and pictures posted by their online “friends.”
- Find ways to safely harness the educational value of social networking. Blogs, monitored chat rooms and safe networking sites can be used by teen groups to communicate and share information.
- For adults that do participate in online social networking sites, be sure to use these sites wisely when working with teens. Make sure your information, pictures and postings are all appropriate for viewing by the teens you work with. If they are not, maintain separate sites for your friends and for the teens in your program. Be sure not to accept teens as “friends” if they have inappropriate material on their site. Being connected to teens through these sites can be useful for maintaining communication, but needs to be used sensibly.
- Provide workshops for teens to help them maintain their verbal communication skills. Offering interviewing skills and resume writing workshops can assist teens in developing and enhancing skills needed for school projects and college and job interviews.
- Provide informational materials and/or workshops for parents, so they can be well informed on how and why teens communicate as they do.

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