



WOMANNEWS

WORKING

Returning calls, e-mail isn't magic; it's smart

By **Jacqueline Fitzgerald**
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While the phrase "I'm so busy" is often an excuse for not staying in contact with people, some women—despite or maybe because of their hectic schedules—pride themselves on being exemplary communicators.

What's their secret?

"The priority for me is having good relationships with people," says Hedy Ratner, co-president of the Women's Business Development Center in Chicago. "I spend a whole lot of time on e-mail and on the phone responding to people ... to be available and accessible."

Liz Dennery Marks of Dennery Marks Public Relations in Beverly Hills, Calif., says, "I get a lot out of it in terms of personal fulfillment."

But she adds that it's more than a personal preference. "It's incredibly important to business. If employees are not responsive and polite to customers, it can affect the bottom line, and businesses are not seeing that."

Some businesses do see it. Peggy Nahmany, global communications director at Euro RSCG Worldwide marketing communications agency, says: "I do exactly what I would hope people would do for me if I was in a rush or desperately needed information. Not only does a prompt response demonstrate efficiency and professionalism, it ensures that people will turn to us in the future."

Nahmany believes that returning phone calls and e-mails as quickly as possible is the key to successful communication. "Don't ever ignore a request," she says, "no matter how busy you are. Take a minute to say 'I'm swamped right now, but I'll do it as soon as I have time.'"

"If I can't respond to an e-mail in full immediately, I always at least acknowledge that I've received the request."

Debra Condren, a New York City-based business psychologist and president of Superior-Career.com, agrees that top communicators answer immediately, whether or not they have all the answers. "Knowing

it all upfront isn't the issue," she says. "Letting the client know you are thinking about their problem ... will buy you a great deal of goodwill."

And Condren and Nahmany stress: Keeping your colleagues in the loop is vital. "If I am out of the office or don't have access to e-mail," says Nahmany, "someone on my team will answer. Trust your team, rely on them, talk to them about every situation."

Dennery Marks thinks time management is the core issue of good communication. To be most productive, she suggests deciding where your time is best spent to produce results. Then make two lists—a call-back list and a to-do list—and set priorities. To expedite items on the first list, she suggests aiming to return some calls just before lunch hours begin. "That can shorten your calls to five minutes," she says, laughing.

Ratner says that instead of responding to each message as it comes in, it's more effective to allocate a chunk of time at the beginning and end of the day to return messages.

But even the pros admit that organizing a slew of speedy responses is a tall order, especially given that with more ways to make contact—voice mail, cell phones, e-mail and snail mail—there is more to keep up with. Ratner says that a downside of technology is that it raises people's expectations: "Because communication is easier, they expect a rapid response."

At the same time, technology has made the world seem more impersonal in many respects. But Dennery Marks makes an effort to compensate for that. For example, she sends handwritten notes as well as birthday, anniversary or encouragement cards to individuals, and she has sent Valentine's Day cards to her entire database of about 1,000 people. "If you spend a little bit of time every day reaching out to the important people in your life, both personally and professionally, it can make a world of difference to the quality of your life."

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