

# Reach Out



## Use These Guidelines for Effective Communication

By Ellen L. Joseph, CPA

**T**hrough conversation, e-mail, voicemail, letters, memos and presentations, we're in constant communication with each other. In a world where everyone is pressed for time, how can we efficiently exchange information?

Here are some tips for improving your professional and personal communications.

- **Know your audience.** Are you communicating with a client, first-year staff member, or partner with years of experience? How knowledgeable is your audience about the technical terms you're using? Determine whether or not it's helpful to include citations to the Internal Revenue Code or the Accounting Standards Codification. If you use acronyms, spell them out on the first reference and note the acronym, e.g., "Financial Accounting Standards Board (FASB)."
- **Foster understanding.** If you're requesting information, briefly explain the request. People are more likely to respond if they understand why their response is important. If you're approaching a colleague who works in another department, you might say this: "As you may already know, I'm a member of the team that's working on Project XYZ. As part of the project, we're analyzing sales trends during the past 2 ½ years. Would you please provide gross sales by region for the past 10 quarters?"

- **Consider people's time.** Ask for the information you need as far ahead of your deadline as possible, and include a realistic due date for the response. If the task will require a minimal amount of time, communicate that up front. Busy people are more likely to respond to a request they know will only take 30 minutes than to one with an unknown time commitment. Be sensitive to others' deadlines. For example, don't ask for information from the accounting department during the week they're working on month-end close.
- **Use the active voice.** When writing or speaking in the active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action of the verb. For example, "Speakers will present their findings at the meeting." Using the active voice emphasizes the subject and helps your audience visualize the event. When using the passive voice, the subject of the sentence receives the action of the verb – for example, "Presentations will be made at the meeting." The passive voice may be a better

choice if the subject isn't important, or if you wish to de-emphasize a negative comment. But the active voice generally is more professional because it's more direct.

- **Use correct grammar, punctuation and spelling.** William Strunk, Jr.'s *The Elements of Style* is a great grammar reference book and offers many suggestions for improving written communications. Although spell check is a great tool, it's not a substitute for careful proofreading. Most spell-check dictionaries don't list many of the "terms of art" we use in the accounting profession. For example, I've added "de minimis" to my spell-check dictionary on many occasions.

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