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PRODUCT & SERVICE GUIDE

Are Your Clients Getting Enough FaceTime?

Gregory L. LaFollette • Sep. 05, 2014



Those of you who are “chronologically challenged,” as am I, will remember the *bad* old days of pink “While U Were Out” slips, Franklin Planners and multiple phone calls through secretary-controlled switchboards. Fortunately, we now have Outlook, smartphones and direct inward dial telephone systems ... and that’s just the beginning! Today’s modern practitioner is making full use of social networking services (Facebook and Twitter especially), instant messaging, texting, Skype, and lately, video chatting via Apple’s simply amazing FaceTime application.

Within days of its release, the new iPad 2 has already caught the attention of busy professionals trying to communicate more quickly and more effectively with their equally busy and communication-hungry clients. Although Apple first popularized video chat with its trademarked FaceTime application with the release of the iPhone

4 in June 2010, the world's "innovators" had been working with the concept for years. For example, I know of several accountants who regularly schedule Skype video chats with distant clients. But it's hard, and therein lies the rub: Skype and all the "Skype wannabes" simply aren't ready for Grandma yet. They almost require a dedicated techno-hobbyist with a high degree of "forgiveness" to make a session successful. FaceTime, on the other hand, is what I like to call *stupid-simple*. Example: You're ready to initiate a video call with your biggest client. You find her name in your Favorites list and tap the FaceTime button. Immediately, an invitation pops up on her iPad, iPhone, iPod touch or Mac asking if she wants to join you. Once accepted, the FaceTime connection begins. Up pops her face — virtually life-size on your iPad display. What do you need to accomplish such magic? A Wi-Fi connection, an iPad 2 (actually an iPhone 4, MacBook or iTouch will work, too, but not as elegantly as the iPad 2), an Apple ID and an email address. That's it. Stupid simple. It's actually easier than dialing some old-style cell phones!

Now many will scoff at the concept, but in my completely unscientific survey methods I have found that nearly 100% of those who tried it, liked it. The addition of video to otherwise synchronous communication seems to improve effectiveness by orders of magnitude. Psychologists tell us that as hi-tech continues to take over our interactions, humans' desire for "hi-touch" increases. Video chat seems to help meet part of that growing desire. Simple screen sharing works great for tactical conversations involving hard numbers, such as a tax return. For more conceptual discussions like corporate strategy, the addition of video with its facial nuance, can be extremely valuable. One New York City accountant told me he's buying iPad 2's for a dozen of his very best clients and telling them he's now available for FaceTime chat whenever they need him. While that might be over the top for many practitioners, it seems to me that \$500 might be considered a solid investment to demonstrate your commitment to the needs of a major client. And if that sounds scary to you, I invite you to consider your client's response when your competitor gifts him an iPad with a similar open invitation for "on-call" communication. Now THAT'S scary!

An Iowa-based practitioner told me how she intends to use the FaceTime application. Her firm examines the financial statements of a multi-site farm implement dealer, and the engagement requires simultaneous inventory observation. This severely strains her staff and often places young, inexperienced staff in positions demanding judgment skills they've simply not yet acquired. "Many city kids don't know the difference between a chisel plow and a combine," she told me. Until now, she's relied on emailed photos — workable, but not very efficient.

“Next summer’s audit should be a lot easier with iPads out there at remote locations,” she said.

There are, however, downsides. First is the question of interoperability. Apple’s CEO Steve Jobs has never been known for a willingness to cooperate with the rest of the tech industry, and his approach here is no different. If you want to play, you have to buy an Apple product. Period. And then there’s the whole new world of “video chat etiquette.” Up until now, video chat had been limited mostly to the office/desk world. The iPad, iPhone and iTouch have changed all that. I’m sure you’ve all experienced the public restroom cell phone user, right? Annoying, I know. But the idea of that turning into video chat raises *annoying* to a whole new level!

PS: I ordered my iPad 2 hours after the Apple store began accepting orders on March 11, and was crushed when I discovered it wouldn’t be delivered for 25 days! How WILL I ever manage to wait that long?

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