



## COMMUNICATION WITH STAKEHOLDERS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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ORIGINAL TEXT IN ENGLISH

The whole concept of “communication” or “communicating” has evolved dramatically in the past 30 years. If we were participating in this event in 1980, few, if any, of us would have computers. We would not have e-mail or mobile phones. All of the pre-event planning and communication would have been done by letters or, if we were very “cutting edge”, a fax machine. Now, most of us cannot contemplate being able to interact with our colleagues, friends and families without the “instant gratification” of today’s technology. We would not have been encouraged to turn off our cell phones and Blackberries (as I am sure you all have) before listening to our speakers today. This is both a blessing and a curse, seen from a practical and culturally dynamic perspective. But what does it mean for the stakeholders within our sporting community?

The SportAccord Convention first took place in 2003, so we have experienced significant changes in how we communicate just within the six years we have been in existence. Some of what is termed “new technology” has made jobs easier or faster, some has provided unexpected challenges and exciting opportunities for creative thinking, and some, to be honest, has proven to be over-hyped and completely unnecessary!

The SportAccord International Convention is, above all, an international event, involving participants with vested interests throughout the entire world. The digital communications revolution makes it possible for us to reach all of these people in a way that would have been inconceivable 30 years ago. For example, our website now features a video archive of the most recent event, enabling those who were not able to attend in person to see and hear the sessions they missed during the week. This is a huge advance in opening up the Convention to colleagues and constituents in all parts of the world.

The website also features interviews with the top decision-makers in the world of sports business, including federation representatives, event organisers and host-city advocates. This enables them to communicate directly with the world. So this digital environment is not only about us communicating information; it is about a multi-dimensional,

instantaneous medium that allows our friends and colleagues to communicate with each other, as well as with people outside the SportAccord family. Thanks to new media and digital production techniques, the SportAccord Convention has become a platform for them to get their messages out. And not just once a year, when we are all together at the event, but all year round. This is an area that we are paying close attention to, and we look forward to sharing exciting and expanded opportunities with you for the near and long term.

As someone who works on creating and delivering physical events for people to attend in person, I am profoundly aware of the disproportion in energy, time and costs between putting on – and attending – a live event, and the possibilities opened up by digital communication. In an age when it is so easy to e-mail, conference call, video link or call a mobile phone anywhere in the world, why do we ever need to fly somewhere and meet up in person? What makes a live event different from or better than digital communication? That is something we have to think about all the time. Our SportAccord community is the international sporting world and includes people from different generations, different countries, different sports and vastly different cultures, each with distinctive approaches to putting on events, managing businesses and governing sport. As sport becomes ever more international, in part due to new technology, it is vital that these varied constituents not only communicate with each other frequently and straightforwardly, but also get to know each other and be able to understand the nuances of how each thinks and works. Being able to communicate quickly and easily, but behind the impersonality of a machine, is never a substitute for having a face-to-face conversation with someone and being able to understand their personal point of view or attitudes towards mutual sporting interests.

It is similar to sport itself. Even though we frequently (and in some cases only) “consume” our favourite sporting events through various electronic means, at its core, unless you are playing a digital game of some sort, sport is a personal exchange between competitors. It involves real people, real emotions, real effort and a real, physical exchange. That is what we love about it, even if we are seeing it thousands of miles away from the venue where it is taking place.

The same holds true for those of us who are not on the actual playing field. No amount of technology can take the place of that personal exchange, which is why SportAccord exists. Our challenge as a networking event is to determine how we use technology to enhance the “live” experience, rather than replace it. As the digital possibilities evolve, we will need to continuously improve the live event by developing aspects that will make it more valuable to attendees.

Our Networker tool, which enables our attendees to communicate with each other prior to the event and set up meetings with the people they most want to see there, is a good example of this. Here is a case where a digital option actually makes the live event more productive and interactive. As technology advances, we will continue to explore ways of harnessing it to make personal, one-to-one communication easy, efficient and, hopefully, enjoyable.

As for practical, ongoing day-to-day communications, the digital revolution has brought two changes on reverse sides of the coin. First, it has made communicating with our delegates and sponsors all around the world much easier and potentially more effective. Second, it has raised everyone’s expectations enormously – not only about receiving content but also about when and how it is communicated to them.



In an environment where communication is technically easy and fast, we are very aware that there can be such a thing as “over-communicating”. The SportAccord Convention takes place one week a year. That does not mean that we have to be in your email box for the other 51 weeks. Being in somebody’s inbox every day might well keep you at the “top of their minds” – but what they are thinking about you might not be so positive! Just because technology enables you to do something does not necessarily mean you should do it, particularly across multiple time zones and cultures.

More and more, with television, DVDs, email, junk mail and other forms of unsolicited “advertising”, people have the option to ignore the “noise”, and they do. In an atmosphere of “instant” and often “too much” communication, it is important that what you DO communicate is necessary, easily understood and timed appropriately. One of the challenges we all face is how to cut through the bombardment of messages our delegates receive on a weekly, daily and sometimes, hourly basis, so that ours gets through. So the key message here is that, as technology enables faster, easier and more targeted delivery of information, there must be more of an emphasis on the content that is being delivered, or it is all a waste of time, effort and money.

I would also like to mention briefly how much our organisation relies on technology internally to communicate on a daily basis. Our staff consists of a “virtual” team of people based in many different countries and time zones, and every year includes an event organising committee in a different part of the world. Yet, with the technology available to us today, we can all talk to each other regularly, sometimes on an hourly basis, have group conversations on Skype conference calls, and, if we remember to turn on the computer cameras, even see each other every day. The result is a smooth, cost-effective operation, which is as cohesive as if we were all sitting next to each other in the same office every day of the week.

So, some of the direct benefits of the “digital revolution” for us have been:

1. being able to easily reach a large, world-wide audience, and generate awareness of our event through search engines on the internet;
2. being able to time and target specific messages for different stakeholders and therefore eliminate some of the “noise” they receive, which means our message has a better chance of being received and understood;
3. being able to link/connect the international sports community through our website, our conference, our networking initiatives and our ongoing SportAccord offerings.

In conclusion, I guess my point is that technology allows for some amazing interactions and can speed up, facilitate and enhance our ability to communicate with each other and with our stakeholders. But in the end, you still have to communicate. You still have to get your message across in a way that people understand and appreciate. It is also important to remember that “communication” is a two-way street. With the many options now available to all of us for getting our messages out to stakeholders, we run the risk of forgetting that half of the “communication equation” involves listening! It is not just about us communicating our message to them, but about stakeholders being able to connect and have a meaningful dialogue with us.

So we need to be sure that we do not use technology just because it is there and because we can. We must remember that ultimately, it is the direct, human-being-to-human-being interaction that has the most significance and power.