



Bulletin

Texting and Email: No Time to Talk

In the new high-tech world, is the phone conversation dying?

by: Cynthia Ramnarace | from: [AARP Bulletin](#) | June 20, 2011

If the telephone were to die, Marlene Caroselli would wear a red dress and do a jig at the funeral.

"At the risk of sounding like a curmudgeon, I hate talking on the phone," says Caroselli, 68, of Rochester, N.Y. "It is usually a complete waste of time, and, nearing my septuagenarian decade, I don't have much time to waste."

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Talking on the telephone is as obsolete as the rotary phone and landlines. — Kim Ohrling/Aurora

She doesn't mind talking when it's something substantive: shouldering a friend through a hard time or conducting business related to her job as an author and corporate trainer. "But when it's prattling I feel trapped," says Caroselli. Setting up a lunch date often digresses into "topics like new linoleum or the pain and heartache of psoriasis." She has no patience for it.

Caroselli is far from alone in her assessment of the telephone as an imperfect form of communication. In fact, one in four Americans has abandoned the landline telephone, the one that you have to plug into a wall and can't clip to your waistband. Younger adults make up the majority of mobile-phone-only communicators, but older adults are following the trend. From 2007 to 2010, the number of people ages 45 to 64 who gave up their landlines increased by 143 percent, from 7 percent to nearly 17 percent of older adults in that category. Among people over age 65, the numbers increased 170 percent, from 2 percent of the population to 5.4, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

At the same time that people are abandoning voice-only landline communication, they are warming to

its successor: the [text message](#). Armed with a mobile phone with a standard keypad that spells QWERTY across the upper left row, you can send brief messages that arrive instantaneously on the recipient's phone. From 2009 to 2010, text-message usage increased 46 percent in the 45-to-54 age range, 54 percent in those 55 to 64, and 3 percent in those over 65, according to the Nielsen Company. Its polls show that the average 60-year-old sends 129 text messages per month — an average of four per day.

Text-happy in America

Why has text messaging become so dominant so fast? Three reasons, says [Naomi Baron, professor of linguistics at American University](#) and author of [Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World](#). Privacy, control and expediency.

"Texting lets you decide when you are going to send a message, when you're going to view a message and when you're going to respond to it," says Baron. "If I'm on the telephone with you, I don't have those options."

And on the phone, we have to engage in Caroselli's scorned chit-chat. Texting cuts to the chase, asking a straightforward question in anticipation of a succinct response.

"If I text you, I don't have to go through the niceties of warming up the conversation, having a pleasant good-bye and then maybe, if I'm so foolish as to say "How are you?" and you say something other than "fine," I have to listen to you," says Baron. "We do not wish to do this anymore. That is exceedingly clear, particularly in the United States. Talking takes too long."

"We may say we don't have the time, but what we lack is the patience to give somebody a hearing," says Baron.

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The man-machine connection

Neil Gussman can't fathom this type of thinking. He loves the telephone. After regaining consciousness following a near-fatal bike crash, the first thing he asked for was his [cellphone](#). Talking, he says, is the best way to truly know what a person is thinking and how he is really doing.

"By telephone, I get so much more information out of people," says Gussman, 58, of Philadelphia. "It has intonation and feeling. You can't edit your voice if you're surprised. Most people will betray a little bit of it. I can tell if something is going wrong, or if they're actually happy."

And while [emailing](#) and texting have become commonplace in the business world, conversation expert Debra Fine warns against relying on it too much. Business is about relationships, after all, and if you're just a name on a screen, you're easily dispensed with.

"When a client hears my voice, I feel we are making a human connection," says Fine, author of *The Fine Art of Small Talk*. "I want my clients to feel connected because then they are more likely to hire me. It is easier to avoid me if they don't have a human connection."

Available to all

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But there are those who say the telephone makes us too available, especially to those we don't want to talk to. Marcia Noyes, 57, of Golden, Colo., is counting the months left on her landline contract because she can't wait to get rid of the thing.

"My phone rings off the wall, and it's nothing more than people looking for donations and salespeople," Noyes says. "So I completely ignore it." The only time the landline could have been useful was when her community issued evacuation orders by telephone in advance of a threatening wildfire. Because they never answer the phone, her family never received the alert. Fortunately there was no damage to her home, and she did learn that she could give her local fire station her cellphone number for future advisories.

Ways to keep up

So how does Noyes communicate? She uses her [iPhone](#) to email, text-message and update her Facebook account. Upon finishing a marathon, she found it much easier to update her [Facebook status](#) with her accomplishment than to field repetitive phone calls from well-wishers. If she does talk on the phone, it's usually to reach her father.

"I would love to get my dad texting so I could keep in touch that way," she says. "But it's a struggle for people who don't have good eyesight."

Like many parents of teens and young adults, Noyes found herself texting more as her children — ages 17, 20 and 21 — took to the technology. If she wants to reach her two oldest, who are in college, she knows better than to try to call. Instead, she texts as a way to check in or set up a time to talk. And then there are weekly [video Skype chats](#) that give her the comfort of seeing her kids, hearing their voice and seeing their body language.

But while people might be using their phones for a myriad activities other than talking, it doesn't mean they've given up the habit. According to Nielsen Company statistics, the average older adult uses 400 talk minutes a month on their mobile phone, half the time 18- to 24-year-olds spend. Fine argues that texting, Facebook and email have allowed people to remedy an ugly truth about the telephone: It's rude.

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Unwelcome?

When the device first came on the scene in homes in the first part of the 20th century, the ringing phone was cause for either celebration or dismay. "You didn't call to chat," says Baron. "But after World War II, as phones became a little more inexpensive ... it rang and you said, 'Oh good!' And then we started getting tired of having to answer the phone all the time, in large part because of advertising."

Then came the answering machine, and screening calls, and having to listen to messages and the burden of then returning them. Now, new forms of communication give you control over your talk time.

"With my own children and friends, I know to text them and say, 'Would tonight be a good night to talk?' " says Fine. "I am setting up the phone call so I am not interrupting. When I just call and say, 'Is this a good time,' someone might say yes, but you can tell you didn't catch them at a good time. And that diffuses the point of my phone call. There will be none of the connection that I hoped for because they weren't prepared for my phone call."

Other forms of messaging can also let you know when a friend really needs a phone call.

"Sometimes you can tell with a Facebook post that something is going on and they could use a call," says Noyes. "That's when I pick up the phone."

When to ... call, text, email or Facebook

With so many ways to communicate, it can be hard to decipher which one is appropriate for the information you need to share. Here are some pointers from communications expert Debra Fine.

- Personal or complicated discussions: Email or text first to set up a convenient time for a phone call.
- Sharing pictures of your grandchild's graduation: Post them on [Facebook](#).
- Set your next book club meeting date: Email, cc'ing all the participants.
- Checking on an aging parent: Phone call, which allows you to better pick up on subtleties that could indicate problems.
- Talk to a faraway grandchild: [Video conference via Skype](#).
- Share good news, such as a promotion at work or new grandchild: Facebook status update.

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