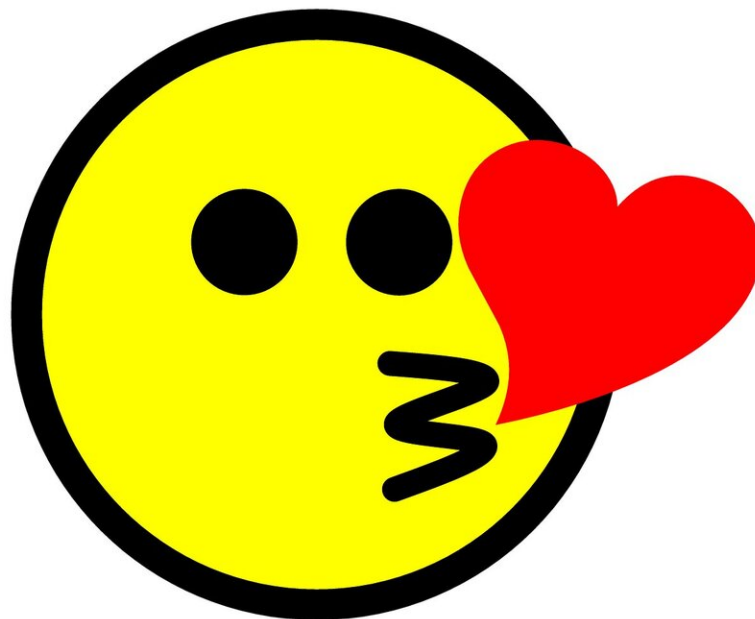


# Call, don't email: The perils of conveying emotions virtually

August 17 2020, by Molly Dannenmaier

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The only thing harder than knowing what to say to stressed co-workers

or customers is knowing whether to say it face to face or via email or phone. But new research from the McCombs School of Business at The University of Texas at Austin offers some guidance: If the emotion behind the message is authentic, it should be delivered in person or through live video. If it's not, then call—don't email.

Two new studies led by assistant professor of management Andrew Brodsky explored the challenges of conveying emotions virtually, finding in one that people who risk revealing more of their true emotions by meeting or calling are perceived as more emotionally authentic than those who send [email](#), even when they use the same words. This finding, online in advance in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, is the first empirical evidence that recipients judge messengers' emotional authenticity by the method they choose.

Brodsky's second study shows that typos in email may reveal the writer's underlying emotions in ways similar to in-person interaction. These results are online in advance in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, and are the first evidence that writers transmit unintentional emotional cues via text-based media.

"The standard advice lately is, 'Email a colleague to offer your support,'" Brodsky said. "But our research shows that people see email as a cheap way to say something, so it may be better to do something richer, like meeting virtually or on the phone to show you more authentically care."

The virtual emotional authenticity research shows that a [phone call](#) is a good middle ground when someone feels ambivalent but needs to project a certain emotion. This is because it hides telltale body language while still seeming high effort and, therefore, more believable than email.

Brodsky found the most emotionally authentic method is in-person or uses video, but if the messenger is not feeling the appropriate emotions,

there's a risk the truth will come out in unintentional, nonverbal cues. Email is low risk, but people receiving email know that, and therefore they view the writer as less emotionally authentic.

Typos in email can also convey emotion. Brodsky's second paper, co-written with doctoral student Hayley Blunden of Harvard Business School, shows that when people receive emails containing errors, they assume the writers' emotions have clouded their thinking, and they perceive the messages as more [emotional](#) than emails without errors.

"It has always been assumed that in email, anything unintentional is edited out, because you can review and revise," Brodsky said. "But just as in face-to-face interaction, where we're not thinking about how we're moving our face as we're talking, we can also transmit emotion over email in ways we don't even realize."

When participants found typos in angry or joyful emails, they rated the messenger's emotion as much more intense. But when they found typos in emotionally neutral messages, they attributed the errors to the writer's lack of intelligence, as has been demonstrated in other studies.

"When we write emails, we're very much in our own heads, and we don't think about how the person from the other side is going to receive it," Brodsky said. "The idea is trying to be very mindful about the other person's expectations and to consider how they might interpret what you write."

**More information:** Andrew Brodsky. Virtual surface acting in workplace interactions: Choosing the best technology to fit the task., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0000805](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000805)

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