ALTERNATIVELY SPEAKING

VOL. 3, NO. 3

# Talking on the Telephone


Given the attitude toward disability in most cultures, interactions, even friendly ones, require asserting and reasserting our power and authority as communicative equals. This is particularly tricky when using the telephone. Over the years my wife, Carole, and I have developed some procedures which usually work well.[1]

## Supports

It is important to have the technology and support you need to access telecommunications for personal and impersonal business because telephone communication is complicated. There are many kinds of phone calls and various relationships with the people we call.

## Email

You can do more with a telephone than just talk. My current favorite way to use the phone is through my personal computer. I subscribe to an online service for my computer. One of the features of the online service is electronic mail (also called email.) I can write a quick note to someone and put it in his/her "mailbox" anywhere in the world. When the recipient of the message turns on the computer, a message will flash that there is mail waiting. I find that many phone calls can be replaced with email. I am more likely to communicate with people if I can use email rather than the telephone because I can use it the same way anyone else can. I like the format of email very much. In fact, I did a whole issue of *Alternately Speaking* about email and the Internet because I feel it is such an important tool for augmented communicators.[2]

## Fax

Another information age telephone tool that keeps me in touch with people is the fax machine. I can print a little note or a formal message and send it quickly and inexpensively to another fax machine anywhere in the world. It is also handy for sharing any illustration or text that I have on paper, but not in my computer.

## Voice

Sometimes a voice telephone call is the best way to communicate. For an augmented communicator to make voice telephone calls, however, requires creativity and resourcefulness. Here are some strategies that I have tried.

### Using an Interpreter

Sometimes I use a voice interpreter. A voice interpreter is someone who understands my

*Continued on page 2*

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE

# Message from the author

I found a very old address book in back of a drawer the other day. Leafing through it, I discovered it was filled with a personal history I had long since forgotten. As I flipped through its faded pages, faces of old friends and family members, a few teachers and a couple of SLPs swam up to greet me. That's the fun part.

The hard part of this experience was dealing with the memories of all those negative feelings of being a person with a disability who couldn't use the telephone. As a child, adolescent, and even as a young adult, I doubt if I said five words on the telephone clearly enough so I could be understood. Two of those words were hello and good-bye; the other three words are lost in the mists of time.

Back in the 1940s, when I was a child, the phone was used mainly for business and other formal occasions. Rare was the day indeed when two people had a phone conversation just for fun.

My age probably accounts for a lot of my negative feelings about the telephone. I don't see the phone as an instrument of pleasure. I am amused as well as annoyed when my teenaged son talks on the phone for hours, and amazed when my five-year-old daughter answers the telephone with the aplomb of a seasoned butler.

Technological advances have made it possible for many augmented communicators to use the telephone, if not with ease, a lot more conveniently than I did as a boy.

I've developed many strategies for using the telephone. I hope these will be useful to some of you. No one need feel uncomfortable around telephones like I do. They are just another tool for living, which, with a little thought and imagination, can be used by augmented communicators. AS

ALTERNATIVELY SPEAKING (ISSN 1075-3982) is published quarterly by Augmentative Communication, Inc., 1 Surf Way, Suite 237, Monterey, CA 93940. Telephone: (408) 649-3050. FAX: (408) 646-5428.
One Year Subscriptions: By personal check U.S. & Canada=$32 U.S.; Overseas=$40 U.S.; Institutions: U.S. & Canada=$48 U.S.; Overseas=$57 U.S. Single Issues $13.
Special rates for consumers and full-time students.
Periodicals Postage Paid at Monterey, CA. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to ALTERNATIVELY SPEAKING, c/o Augmentative Communication, Inc. 1 Surf Way, Suite 237, Monterey, CA 93940-3451.



Author: Michael B. Williams
Technical Editor: Carole Krezman

*Continued from page 1*

speech, my VOCA and my letterboard. This is always someone I have trained to act in a professional way as an interpreter. Not many of my personal assistants have been able to learn how to be interpreters. It is very difficult, and yet crucial, for the interpreter to keep out of the telephone conversation. There are times when he or she could clarify meaning or add data to the conversation which might be helpful, but stepping out of the role of interpreter takes the phone call away from me.

Whenever people interpret for me, they identify themselves by given name and say that they are working for me or are my interpreter. They do not mention any social relationship we may have. By minimally identifying themselves, they help to establish that I am in charge of my end of the phone call. We want the person on the other end of the line to see the interpreter as subordinate to me.

Another benefit to giving the interpreter's first name only is that it keeps the name off bureaucratic forms. Computers always need a last name. It also discourages people from calling an interpreter when they want to discuss my business. Calls must be returned to me. The interpreter tries to be as flat as possible: a non-person. There are two people on the phone and the interpreter is not one of them.

Carole, my best interpreter, usually implies that the need for the interpreter is the listener's need. "I am here in case YOU have difficulty listening to or


understanding Michael." It helps to set up the balance of power. I want it to be clear who is perceived as lacking in communicative ability: the listener.

### Using Scripts

For some calls I give an assistant a script. The assistant says "Hello, I'm Ellen. I work for Michael Williams. He has asked me to tell you this:" Then she reads the script. If there is any discussion she just keeps repeating the message: "Well, it says here...." This is good when the phone call is merely a message. It is also effective when the person on the other end is likely to argue and I am sure I don't want to hear it. This technique also works when my assistant personally objects to the content of the message. It makes it clear to both the assistant and the person on the other end of the phone that she is only the messenger.

### Brief calls

When I receive a phone call from a stranger, I use a regular telephone. The messages are usually short, and an assistant asks the caller to hang on while he or she relays the message. The assistant makes sure the telephone mouthpiece is close enough that the caller can hear his or her message repeated accurately without editorializing. Then I try to give proof that the reply is coming from me, either by the sound of my voice or VOCA in the background, or by my assistant voicing the letterboard as he or she reads it. This way, it is clear that the response is emanating from me.

### Long conversations

For long conversations on a regular phone, I can usually build up enough of a rapport to get the other person to pause for a-second between phrases. If Carole is interpreting, for example, she puts her hand over the telephone mouthpiece and she repeats what is being said to me three or four words behind the speaker. The speaker hears her mumbling through her fingers and knows that the message is getting to me and that he/she should talk slowly. Carole can't concentrate on the meaning of words when she does this, but that doesn't matter because it is not her phone call.

### Using a mute button

Newer phones have a mute button. This turns off the mouthpiece so the person on the other phone cannot hear us talking. This also can make it easier for the person on the other end of the line, since hearing someone's mumbling can be distracting. On the other hand, the mumbling can also be a verification that the message is getting through. Some people like to hear a lot of verification ("mhm," "uhhuh," "yeah") while they are talking and will stop if they can't hear any. Other people are quite content to talk into a void. I click the mute button off at each pause so I can respond.

### Using a speakerphone: Disadvantages

I also use a speakerphone. The speakerphone has some disadvantages such as eliminating privacy. Sometimes a conversation is changed by the lack of intimacy. Anyone who happens to be in our home can hear the call. Another problem is that most speakerphones don't allow talking over each other like a regular phone. I can't interrupt or laugh or make verifying noises on the speakerphone when someone is talking to me. Any stray sounds in the house (conversation as well as radios, children, vacuums) can block out the sound of either caller's voice. I may not want the person on the other end of the line to incidentally hear these activities in our home. Additionally, I find it can make some people nervous to talk to me on a speakerphone.

### Using a speakerphone: Advantages

On the other hand, I can be more independent on the speakerphone. I can use a VOCA and hear firsthand what is being said to me without an interpreter or assistant. Sometimes people need to have the VOCA translated, but at least they hear it, and many people learn to listen to it after a little while. The main function for my assistant is to be a traffic cop. Since there is a delay between pushing the "talk" button and when the talking begins, and since people often won't shut up, I cue my assistant to say, as the speaker takes a breath, "Michael would like to saaaay..." which gives the VOCA time to kick in. I like the speakerphone. I have to put less energy into establishing control over the conversation and being a communicative equal to the person on the other end of the line.

### Just listening

If I am not going to need to talk much other than "No" and

*Continued on page 4*

*Continued from page 3*

"Okay," I use a regular telephone without an interpreter to talk to friends. I don't like to do this much because I don't like to be linguistically muzzled.

### Filtering

I use the answering machine as a filter. People can call and leave a message for me to call back. If I have a lot to say, I have time to gather my equipment and prepare a response on my VOCA without time pressure.

### Audiotape

I developed an ancient, yet still viable, technique using an audio tape. The tape has been recorded with a message that gives my name and address and asks that I be picked up in a half hour. This works well for the taxi company. The dispatcher says OK and I hang up. This technique is suitable for periodic calls that require no discussion. It might work for 911 calls, too, if one has the presence of mind to work the taperecorder in an emergency.

### Conclusion

There are many telephone behaviors that people don't even notice until the behaviors are missing in an adaptive situation. I am trying to understand the essence of telephone voice communication in order to know how to adapt it and get the same effect. It is just a matter of practice and listening, and of learning what works and what doesn't. AS

# Speech to Speech

Talking on a telephone is problematic at best for a person with dysarthric speech. The person may feel at ease while talking to friends or family members, but take away this comfortable communication environment, and things often get hectic.

A simple call to a store requesting basic information can quickly turn into a nightmare situation. When dealing with the "normal world" via the telephone, a person with dysarthric speech is likely to witness bewilderment, confusion, anger or just plain rudeness from the person on the other end of the line.

Well, can you blame them? Put yourself in their shoes. You've just experienced the busiest morning in a month at your store. The telephone rings, and you answer in your cheeriest business person's voice. Several seconds of heavy breathing come out of your telephone receiver followed by a deep guttural groan. You don't know what the hell's going on. You hang up. Any sane person would.

But you, as the augmented communicator, are hurt and frustrated by this action. You need information, but now you are discouraged and disheartened. You need somebody to help you make that phone call, but you're home alone. You're stuck until someone

# to Speech

comes to your home and bails you out.

Not anymore. Now there's Speech-to-Speech (STS).

## Telephone support

Speech-to-Speech is a program of the California Public Utilities Commission which is modeled after the California Relay Service (CRS). CRS was designed to allow deaf people who use a text telephone (also called a telephone device for the deaf or TDD) to call hearing people who do not have access to TDDs. In practice, people with hearing impairments and people with speech impairments use the relay service to place and receive calls. The text telephone for the deaf is like a small typewriter that connects to the phone line. In order to receive a TDD call, one must have a TDD. Since many hearing persons and small businesses do not have TDDs, the relay system provides trained telephone operators who translate voice to TDD and TDD to voice. Since this translation is word for word in the same language and only the mode of transmission changes, the process is called a relay. This is a well-established and well-used program which is now replicated in every U.S. state and many countries.[3]

## How it works

Speech-to-Speech works in a similar fashion. This service provides human voicers for people who have difficulty being understood by the public when they use the telephone. STS provides patient, trained, relay operators who are familiar with many speech patterns and have acute hearing. The STS operators relay telephone calls


by repeating unclear or quiet speech word-for-word exactly as it is spoken, but clearly, so that others can understand.

STS is also useful for people who use voice output communication devices. The operator will repeat everything that is said through the communication device while keeping the listener relaxed and occupied as the message is keyed in.

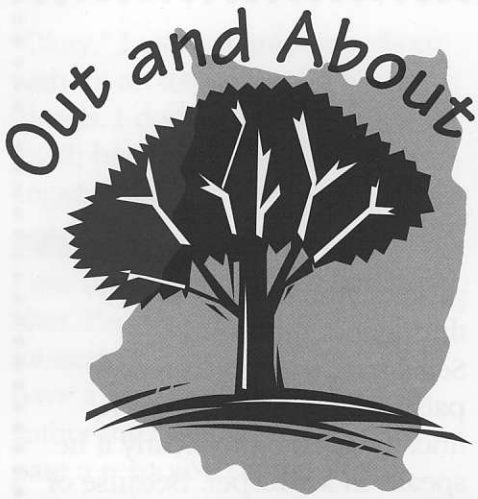
## Making STS available

Speech-to-Speech was initiated by Doctor Bob Segalman who has taken a leave of absence from his job with the California Department of Rehabilitation to promote the concept of STS throughout the world.[4] Segalman, who has cerebral palsy and dysarthric speech, finds he talks more clearly if he speaks in a whisper. Because of this, he often gets odd reactions from his listeners—especially on the telephone where he is sometimes mistaken for a man up to no good. Out of a personal desire to be respected on the telephone, Bob Segalman has created a program which is improving telephone access to many people around the world.

Speech-to-Speech is available (at no charge) in California, Maryland and Wisconsin. Australia will have a six month trial of STS, and the United States Federal Communication Commision (FCC) is considering whether to implement STS nationally as part of their ADA compliance. Many U.S. states and other countries are in the process of developing similar programs. To keep up-to-date on the expansion of this project in the U.S., look at the Electronic Telecommunications Relay Forum on the Web. WWW.48.i.com.

Segalman says of his creation, "Next to getting married and earning a Ph.D., developing Speech-to-Speech is the most exciting thing I've ever done."

AS




# The Virtual Life

I have been involved with personal computing from the beginning. Bellying up to the computer in the old days was a very lonely proposition: It was just me alone with my computer, a few poorly written manuals and some crude application programs.

Things are different now. It's possible to be in touch with the farthest regions of the earth, not to mention to be presented with a myriad of shopping opportunities at stores with sites on the Internet.

The most unexpected benefit of the computer revolution for me has been email. Email has opened up wide vistas of communication opportunities on both an individual and group level and increased my participation within the various communities in which I move.

I send a lot of email, and I get a lot of email, which means I have to read a lot of email. Here are some of the types of mail that gets tossed in my electronic inbox on a daily basis:

- Business mail
- Personal mail
- LISTSERV mail
- Junk mail

The amount of mail I get varies from day to day, but the flow is always uncomfortably large; I must prioritize and weed. I always start with the junk mail. Electronic mail is a wonderful thing, but once you open your email account, you are going to get lots of unwanted mail from people you don't know. Did I say people? These folks are vultures who use automated mass mailing addresses to send you their trash. Even if you wanted to write and protest these mailings, you can't because their real email addresses are nowhere to be found.

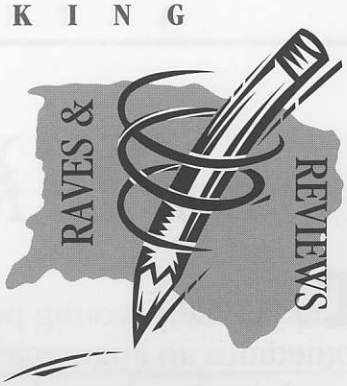
Fortunately, junk mail is fairly easy to spot from the return addresses and subject lines. I recently got an email message from macs@lostvegas.com; it had a subject line of "$$ Easy Money $$." It didn't take me long to realize that this was a piece of junk email that could be deleted without reading. I zapped it with gusto, as I do all my junk mail.

After getting rid of the junk mail, I start on the business mail. I scan these messages for items I must work on immediately and those which I can put aside for later.

When I'm finished with my business email, I turn to my LISTSERV messages. LISTSERVs are discussion groups that are conducted by email. I belong to two LISTSERVs—one for augmented communicators and interested others,[5] and one about the disability community in Berkeley, California.[6] I have one hard and fast rule about LISTSERVs: I only read and respond to those messages I'm truly interested in. If I tried to reply to all the messages within a twenty-four hour period, I'd be sitting at my computer all day. How do I decide which messages interest me? I read the first two lines of each message, if these two lines don't hook me into reading the rest of the message, then it is deleted.

Personal email gets saved for last. By finishing my work first, I know how much time I can spend replying to my friends, and I can enjoy the correspondence knowing there is nothing else I should be doing.

Yes, the computer has truly increased my opportunities for contact with people; I am thrilled by this. I am also very wary of it, for while I'm making contact with all these people through email, I'm still at home, by myself, in front of a computer. This is not good. I find that it is very important to balance contact with virtual people with some real flesh and bones communication. I make sure I take time to engage in life in my neighborhood and community everyday. This is important. You need to see the world outside your door, and the world needs to see you. AS




# *In Praise of Mobility*

If you had just enough resources to purchase either a power wheelchair or an electronic communication device, which would you choose? This question was posed on ACOLUG several months ago, and a lively discussion ensued. Much to my surprise, the majority of people responding to this question opted to have an electronic communication device rather than a power wheelchair. They would rather be pushed in a manual wheelchair by someone and have the ability to be understood clearly via communication aid rather than be able to move about independently via a power wheelchair.

This dialogue started me thinking about the meaning of independent mobility to me.

I was born in a era when power chairs didn't exist and manual wheelchairs weren't very good. It took my parents a long time to find a chair to fit my small body, and when they did, they quickly discovered the chair was no good. It was relegated to the nether regions of our hall closet and exhumed only for occasional outdoor adventures.

Childhood mobility meant crawling, which I did with aplomb, and with my own style. It wasn't your classic baby crawl. It was a kind of leapfrog thing combined with a butterfly-stroke motion. It looked funny, but got the job done.

On the floor of my grandparents' home where I lived with my parents, I was master of my domain. I could go anywhere and explore anything I chose within the perimeter of the ground floor. I felt free, unencumbered by the invisible strings of disability that usually tethered me to one spot in the universe.

But there was a problem with all this. The medical people in charge of my life took a dim view of my crawling. It tightened the hamstrings they said. And indeed it did; I had severe contractures of both legs, the remedy for which was a delicious torture device called long-leg steel braces. They locked at the knee and had a waistband of steel. I was to wear these all day and let them stretch out my legs.

Bedtime gave me no respite from the torture; I remained in them while I slept, lest the spirits of the night be tempted to coax back those contractures.

This played havoc with my freedom. I couldn't crawl with my braces on, and they weren't supposed to come off. But they did come off. Once in awhile someone would release me from my metal prison and let me down on the floor, thus undoing the day's stretching. I didn't care; I was free once again to do what I wanted if only for a few minutes.

Then during my early adolescence, when they decided I had grown enough, the medical people decided to straighten my legs. For some reason I have yet to figure out, I was unable to crawl after the operation.

My physical therapist kept challenging me to do strange things, like walk, which I did one day out of the blue. I just took one step on my own, then I took another and another. Soon I was getting around the house on my own in an upright position.

The out of doors was a different matter. The confidence I felt walking around the house suddenly evaporated as soon as I stepped out the door. Perhaps there were too many variables in the environment—people passing by, cars whizzing past. The possibility that I might fall was heightened by being outside. In time, I could make it around my high school campus, but I never felt comfortable. I would come home exhausted, the smell of fear clinging to me like a weary cloak.

Many years later, as I was poised on the brink of middle age, I took my first ride in a power wheelchair. As I rolled down the street by myself, I felt that old sense of freedom I used to feel on the floor returning to me; only this was the big time. Michael Williams was loose on the streets without fear. There was—and is—no turning back. AS

# *Top 10 Reasons to Call*


Traditionally, young people like to talk on the telephone. Sometimes an augmented communicator might not realize how important it can be to have access to the telephone. I asked a teenaged boy from California[7] to give me a "Top 10 list" of the most important reasons to make phone calls. Maybe some of these are important to you, too.

Here's the list:

10. Talk about parents and teachers.
9. Plan what to wear.
8. Do homework together.
7. Plan what to do next.
6. Set up when and where to meet.
5. Share information.
4. Talk.
3. Ask to borrow stuff.
2. Find out who likes you.
1. Work out problems with your clique.

Send me a fax or e-mail and tell me how you use the telephone.

The next issue will be about work.

*What jobs do you do?*

You can write to me: Michael Williams, Augmentative Communication Inc., One Surf Way, Suite 237, Monterey, California 93940.

You can send me a fax at (408) 646-5428.

You can send me electronic mail at mbwill@well.com

# *Sources & Resources*

1. Many of the ideas in this article are adapted from an article by Carole Krezman and Michael B. Williams in *Augmentative Communication News,* Vol. 4, No. 4.

2. *Alternatively Speaking*. Vol. 2, No. 3.

3. For more information about Speech-to-Speech, write the California Relay Service, Customer Service Department, 6436 Oakdale Road, Riverbank, CA 95367. Fax: 209-863-3089. Voice: 800-735-0373. TTY: 800-735-0193.

4. Bob Segalman can be reached via Speech-to-Speech at 800-854-7784 (ask for Bob Segalman at 888-377-3324) or by FAX at 916-649-1665.

5. To join ACOLUG, email Graciela Slesaransky-Poe at graciela@astro.ocis.temple.edu

6. To join Berkeley-Disabled, email Scott Luebking at CripTrip@aol.com

7. Thank you, Malcolm, for your assistance.