



Silence is (NOT) the New No!

Sept 24, 2019

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Occasionally I'm driven to talk about a topic that is not necessarily photography specific, but certainly comes into play in business, and today is one of those days. I'm seeing this more and more, over the last ten years or so, and frankly, I'm getting tired of people using silence as the new no.

Since I came to Japan in 1991, many times I've heard people use a tongue-in-cheek statement about the Japanese not being able to say no. Indeed, in my previous IT related job, I recall a number of times when I'd ask someone to do a job or provide a service that they felt was not possible, and the reply was rarely "no". They'd say, for example, that it would be "difficult" to do.

Knowing perfectly well that they were simply trying to say "no" I would generally retort that doing things that are difficult is what makes us successful, and I'd get them to take on the job or provide the service I needed doing, but that's a different story. My point here is that even with this style of avoiding saying "no" you still know where you stand. It's easy to see that they mean no, and a more tactful Japanese businessman may accept that as a no and move on, but whichever way you look at it, you still have an answer that you can work with.

These days though, I am seeing more and more often people around the world deciding to not reply to an email as a way to say "no" and today, I'd like to talk a little about why this is a totally

unacceptable way of doing business, or communicating in general.

Silence Shows a Lack of Negotiation Skills

The first thing I want to impress on you is that if a person cannot talk with you about a request it is a sure sign that they lack the negotiation skills necessary to do their job. People now feel so awkward disagreeing with others, they are choosing silence over negotiating towards a mutually agreeable conclusion. Is it really so difficult to reply to someone in a way that allows the conversation to continue in, what I would image would more often than not be an ultimately positive way? Even if you ultimately refuse, at least you know where you stand, and that is always positive.

Just cutting off the communication completely is highly damaging to a business relationship. It's so damaging that I almost have to think sometimes that the person I am dealing with is willing to completely sacrifice our business relationship rather than professionally overcoming the awkwardness or anxiety that they feel towards saying no. This is even when there is a contract between our two companies that prevents them from simply cutting off the relationship but still, their inability to say no is so paralyzing that it overrides the logical outcome that will ultimately happen. For example, at some point, we are probably going to be forced to talk to someone

else in that company to get a result, and when that happens, it often shows the initial person that used silence as "no" in a less than favorable light. Still, this happens, and I want to raise the alarm.

Be Professional

Now, of course, in some cases, our own behavior might be at least part of the cause of this silence. I do tend to be a bit outspoken in person, but in email, when I have more time to think through my communication more, I don't believe that my communication is threatening or aggressive. Many years ago, I would have doubted myself more. I used to be quite aggressive in my communication, but during the ten years that I worked as a senior manager in Tokyo, I learned that this is never the way to communicate.

My thinking used to be that if someone has obviously made a mistake or done something wrong, it was totally fine to bring that to their attention, in an often not very tactful way. The problem with this is that people rarely make mistakes or do things wrong intentionally. That doesn't make it right, but pulling someone up for these things only causes them to resent you, and never results in them changing their behavior, and therefore is in general counter-productive. People can and do change, but that takes a whole different level of coaching that is not possible with a few email messages.

Rejection Sensitivity Related?

I have actually also wondered if this is perhaps related to a tendency for people to avoid the possibility of rejection or conflict. For example, if they were to send an email telling someone that they don't need their services or think it's too expensive, they could find themselves in a situation that they emotionally cannot bear. I've heard stories of younger people these days avoiding getting into relationships for fear of how painful it would ultimately be to split-up from their partner. I can't help wondering if this tendency of using silence as a "no" is related to that kind of mentality.

Email is Not Infallible

In addition to showing a lack of negotiation skills, people should also understand that email is no longer an infallible form of communication. Statista shows that as of 2018 45.3% of all email sent is spam, and that sounds like a lot, but it's down from 92.6% in 2008, just ten years ago. The reason it's down, is because companies are implementing a multitude of standards to prove the identity and validity of the sender, and while this is, of course, a good thing, I've noticed more and more, over the last three to four years, that people I do business with, and my own email, end up in the recipients spam folder at an alarmingly high frequency. These are often people that I have done business

with for years, and companies that are respectable and trustworthy.

Checking our spam folder for email has become relatively common and quite often, if we are looking for an email, we find it hidden in the depths of that spam folder. This is not what's happening with the silence tactics that I'm referring to in this email though. Email generally doesn't just switch from normal deliverability to spam overnight. Plus, I run my own email server and can check the logs. If something goes to spam I can see that it went there, but I have no control over the email before it hits my system, and therefore, there is always the possibility that someone flicked a switch on an intermediate email server that caused the email I am waiting for to be blocked.

This is another reason that using silence as a way of saying no is so dangerous. These days, as a recipient, we are simply left with at least a little bit of doubt as to whether or not the email was blocked, or if we are receiving the silent treatment. We can ask, and I generally do if I don't get a reply after a week or so, but when that doesn't prompt a response, I generally start to worry.

People Get Busy!

Of course, the other possibility is that the other party has simply gotten too busy to reply. I have always tried to at least send a reply telling the person that sent an email telling them that I received it, and that I will reply fully as soon as

possible, also giving a timeframe when possible. For example, when I'm on tour, especially in January and February when I run my three winter tours back to back, I often receive email that I have no option but to ignore for a few days, but then I try to catch up as soon as possible as my time frees-up.

Even then though, I always have time to at least scan through my email, and when I see a mail from a client or business partner that is obviously important, I at least try to reply and tell them when I will try to provide a full reply. Simply ignoring an email comes across as this new "no", but having confirmation that your email has arrived and that you will reply makes a huge difference.

I was bitten by the busy silence yesterday when I received a reply from the developer of the Meow Gallery and Lightbox plugins for WordPress that I discussed in [last week's podcast](#). I made a remark about his statement on his support page, and how I had not received a reply to two of my email. It turns out that he'd been caught up in something and chose not to reply. Seriously, I would have appreciated a quick "I'll get back to you later" reply to let me know that I was at least not being ignored, but based on the nature of our communication to that point, I should have given him the benefit of the doubt. This though is a direct result of my frustration over people using silence as the new "no".

When is it OK?

It would be hypocritical of me to say that I never ignore email, so I have to mention that I will routinely ignore an email that is obviously spam. Even when addressed directly to me, I generally just delete email asking me if I'd like someone to get my site at the top of Google search results. Depending on the keywords used, I almost want to reply and tell them that I already am at the top, but that would be unproductive. I also routinely ignore messages from people offering Photoshop clipping services. This is one of the most common forms of spam these days, and I simply do not need these services.

I am probably one of the few people that actually replies to all requests for work. Every few days I get an email from someone in India, Iran, Nepal or a multitude of other beautiful countries, from a young man or woman requesting that I hire them. I'm not hiring, and the paperwork required to hire them would be prohibitive, but I always reply and thank them for their interest, and I honestly keep these email aside, in case I ever do need to hire someone from one of their countries. Regardless of where people are from, if they take the time to email me directly with such a request, I feel that it's only right to reply.

Respect is Everything

I'm not saying that we should reply to every message we receive though. It's easy to tell the spam from the real

communication, but in a business environment, in my humble opinion, it is never OK to simply use silence as a form of "no". Like I say, this shows a lack of negotiation skills. If you are not equipped with the skills to perform your job, I would recommend that you talk to your boss about getting some training. You are damaging your own and your companies reputations, by simply stopping the communication.

Also, if you are a business coach that is telling people that it's better to just fall silent instead of entering into difficult negotiations, please stop. You'll probably make more money teaching negotiation skills anyway, unless, of course, you have none yourself, in which case a change of job might be the solution

If you are the owner of your own company and also find yourself using these techniques, know that you are not doing yourself any favors. If you feel that the person you were communicating with has absolutely zero value to your organization, then ignoring them is, of course, easier than getting into a conversation about that, but we don't succeed by taking the easy way out. We succeed by respecting people and earning their respect back. Without respect, we cannot move forward in any field. I, for one, lose respect for people that use this communication tactic, and I really hope that this trend gets nipped in the bud sooner rather than later.



This article was first published on Sept 24, 2019



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