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Forward Thinking

By Jeff Ubois
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If you want to know something about who your friends are and what they care about, look at the messages in your inbox and outbox with "FW" in the subject line. What you forward, and what others forward to you, is a revealing record of the interests of your social network over time.

In my case, there's a mix of news, events, journal articles, alarmist political commentary (I do live in Berkeley), jokes, pointers to tools and online services, grant application deadlines, and requests for help to and from friends, colleagues, and distant acquaintances. The apartment I'm living in came to me in part through one of these messages.

Forwarded messages are gifts, and studying gift exchanges is a powerful way to understand human relationships.

"Forwarding is a low cost way of creating a connection and an obligation," says Marc Smith, the sociologist at Microsoft Research, who has been studying what prompts people to share information online. "A forward is like the offer of gum or a cigarette that starts a new conversation, and it's a way of reconnecting with someone without having to say 'oh, I just thought I'd say hi.'"

Relationships change based on how we share information, and with every forward, there is an implicit message of personal concern. At the same time, forwarding a message to one person may jeopardize a relationship with another (the boss says he's thinking of firing you), or it may even be illegal (our company results will be disappointing, sell your stock).

"The social impact of forwarding is that by reducing the cost of maintaining a relationship, it increases the number of possible connections each of us can have, and we gain the strength of weak ties," says Smith, who has developed a tool called SNARF (Social Network and Relationship Finder) to help people manage their email conversations.

Of course, there are limits on the number of such relationships anyone can maintain. As venture capitalist Chris Allen asked in a recent essay (see [Dunbar Triage: Too Many Connections](http://www.lifewithalacrity.com/2005/02/dunbar_triage_t.html)), "How do I maintain meaningful relationships with over 300 people?"

The Cost to Recipients

For recipients, forwarded messages may range in perceived value from very high to very negative. Messages containing untrue virus alerts, chain letters, or irrelevant information are of negative value because they waste time. As economist Herbert Simon put it, "What information consumes is rather obvious: It consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention."

Another potential cost to recipients is the implicit obligation to reply in kind. As Smith puts it, "I think about you and your needs as I forage for information, I prove that with these information trinkets -- are you doing that for me?"

There several practices, tools, and services that can improve the quality of what you forward. A short sentence about context and purpose is often useful, and fact checking messages before sending them is often wise. Snopes.com tracks urban legends, and email messages that shouldn't be forwarded because they contain bogus information. Its [25 Hottest Urban Legends](http://www.snopes.com/info/top25uls.asp) page is essentially a compendium of forwarding gone wrong:

Mail programs aren't always kind to forwarded messages. A forward of a forward of a forward can be hard to read, and long URLs can get broken into pieces that have to be manually re-assembled. Courteous forwarders may clean up messages by hand, or use TinyURL, which converts long URLs into short ones, thus eliminating the line breaks that can confuse mail programs.

Whether to limit a forward simply to a URL, or include the full text of a web page is something of a judgment call. Recipients sitting at desktop PCs connected to broadband networks may appreciate seeing longer messages and avoiding the switch into another app, while Blackberry users may prefer the URL.

The one aspect of forwarding etiquette that seems to be widely accepted is that one shouldn't forward private email messages without permission. While there are gray areas here, demonstrating respect for information that has been shared in confidence is usually a better way to build trust.

Forward By Design

For companies, inspiring people to forward messages onward is good viral marketing. The Word of Mouth Marketing Association specifically mentions creating information designed for forwarding <http://216.122.130.186/wom101e.htm>. Encouraging employees to forward mail can also help companies improve their customer relationships.

Messages received from friends are more likely to be read, and more likely to be credible than messages sent by strangers. That's a principle used by social networking companies such as LinkedIn, by political advocacy groups such as iCanvas, and by media companies such as JibJab.

One of the more interesting recent developments in this area is ForwardTrack, an open source project created by Eyebeam R&D (see <http://forwardtrack.eyebeamresearch.org/>) lets online activists track the forwarding of their email around the country.

Highlighting at what people choose to forward reveals what is relevant. Media companies such as Yahoo!, CNN, ABCnews, the Washington Post, the New York Times, and the Los Angeles Times all collect data about which stories are forwarded most frequently. Looking at what is forwarded most often is a good way to gauge popularity and relevance, and is a simple, low cost collaborative filter.

Pressing the forward button takes only a moment but it's an irrevocable act with potentially long-term consequences: given the right people and circumstances, forwarding an email can make or break a company, friendship, or marriage. We might as well get good at it. [JU/MNP](#)

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