Mainstream communication options

There are a number of convenient and inexpensive text or video-based alternatives to phone calls that may assist people who are deaf, hearing and/or speech impaired to communicate directly with others.

Email

What is it?

Electronic mail or email is a method of exchanging online messages. Many Australians use email as a communication option for work and personal use.

There is no limit on the length of an email message and a wide range of documents, photos and videos can be attached or embedded in the message.

What equipment is needed?

A mobile phone, tablet or computer with data access.

When is it suitable?

- When it is convenient for you to compose the email message. The other party will receive the email even if they are busy at the time you send it.
- It can be a mobile service so you can use it while you are out.
- Because any form of text-based messaging uses very small amounts of your data allowance, it is likely to be cheap to use.

What are the limitations?

- It is not a real-time communication option.
- If you have dexterity issues or poor sight, typing or reading on a small mobile phone keypad may be challenging.

SMS

What is it?

Short Message Service (SMS) is a text communication service sent to and from mobile phones.

What equipment is needed?

Either a mobile phone or a tablet with either a mobile connection or synchronisation with a mobile account.

When is it suitable?

- SMS messages are limited to 160 characters so are best suited to concise communication, although improvement in technology has meant that messages longer than 160 characters now often appear as one message on mobile device screens.
- It is a mobile service so you can use it while you are out.
- The other party will receive the message even if they are busy at the time you send it.
- The overwhelming majority of people in Australia use a mobile phone and have access to SMS as a communication option.

What are the limitations?

- As SMS messages are limited to 160 characters it is not well suited to complex communication.
- If you have dexterity issues, typing on a small mobile phone keypad may be challenging.
- Though SMS messages are usually delivered promptly, it is not real-time communication—there may be delays at times. If there are no delays, responses to messages can be received very quickly if the recipient is available.
- If you intend to use SMS heavily, make sure you are on a mobile phone plan that covers the volume of SMS you will need. Many plans now offer unlimited or a substantial number of SMS messages within Australia.

Instant messaging

What is it?

Instant messaging (IM) is the exchange of messages in real-time via a software application (app). A variety of apps allowing IM are available. Popular examples include:

- Facebook Messenger
- WhatsApp
- Viber
- Google Hangouts
- Google Allo
- Snapchat
- Yahoo Messenger
- Beam Messenger.

What equipment is needed?

A mobile phone, tablet or computer with data access.

When is it suitable?

- IM supports conversation in real-time.
- It can be a mobile service so you can use it while you are out.
- Most exchanges are text only though a number of services enable voice messaging and file sharing.
- Because text-based instant messaging uses very small amounts of your data allowance, it is likely to be cheap to use.

What are the limitations?

Both parties must be online at the same time. They may also need to be using the same software.

If you have dexterity issues or poor sight, typing or reading on a small mobile phone keypad may be challenging.

Social media

What is it?

Social media are websites and applications that encourage users to take part in online communities to share information, ideas, content and personal messages. Some examples include Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

What equipment is needed?

A mobile phone, tablet or computer with data access.

When is it suitable?

- When it is convenient for you to post a message.
- It can be a mobile service so you can use it while you are out.

What are the limitations?

- It is not a strictly real-time communication option, although responses to messages can be received very quickly if other participants are online.
- If you have dexterity issues or poor sight, typing or reading on a small mobile phone keypad may be challenging.
- When posting material online, care needs to be taken that personal information and the information posted is shared with the right people. It's also a good idea to check privacy and security settings. See Keeping safe while communicating online below for more information about safety and privacy.

Video calls

What is it?

Video calls allow people to see each other while talking in real-time. A range of video call apps are available including Skype, Facebook Messenger, Facetime, Google Hangouts and Viber.

What equipment is needed?

A phone, a tablet or a computer with a camera and data access.

When is it suitable?

- For catching up with family or friends.
- It allows people who are deaf or have a speech or hearing impairment to sign and/or lip-read.
- It can be a mobile service so you can use it while you are out.

What are the limitations?

Both parties must be online at the same time. They usually need to be using the same software. Each party must have and be willing to use a camera.

If you intend to make a lot of video calls, make sure you are on a plan that covers the volume of data you will need. A good quality data connection is usually required to use video connections most effectively.

Apps

What is it?

Apps are free or purchased programs which are already preloaded on devices or can be downloaded at a later time. Apps can do a number of different things including make devices work differently for people who are deaf or who have a speech or hearing impairment. In addition to the apps already listed in this Guide, there are apps which can, for example:

- Send video messages (Glide)
- Provide vibrating or flash alerts
- Translate group conversations into text (Ava)
- Convert speech to text (Dragon, Siri).

What equipment is needed?

A mobile phone, tablet or computer with data access.

Finding helpful apps and device features

When considering purchasing a new device it's useful to ask the sales person what helpful device features and apps are available.

The website of the Global Accessibility Reporting Initiative (GARI) lists helpful device features and apps. The GARI website is available at http://www.gari.info/.

What are the limitations?

There are risks with downloading unknown apps to devices. The risks include sharing personal information with the wrong people and possible viruses or malware that could affect devices and personal information. The Australian Communications and Media Authority has some helpful information about using apps safely. This information is available at: www.acma.gov.au/Citizen/Phones/Mobile/Content-and-services/apps-and-in-apps-purchases-a-guide-for-consumers#personal-information.

Business online chat channels

What is it?

Online chat with a business or organisation involves the exchange of text-based messages in real time, usually via a link provided on the website for the business or organisation.

- Online chat channels options are an increasingly popular method chosen by businesses and other organisations to interact with customers or clients.
- Online chat channels are very similar to instant messaging options.

What equipment is needed?

A mobile phone, tablet or computer with data access.

When is it suitable?

- Online chat channels support conversation in real-time.
- It can be a mobile service so you can use it while you are out.
- Online chat channels provided by businesses and organisations are primarily text only.
- Because text-based messaging uses very small amounts of your data allowance, it is likely to be cheap to use.

What are the limitations?

- Online chat channels for interacting with businesses and organisations are only available when staffed by the company providing this communication option. However, in many cases this option is provided for long periods on most days.
- If you have dexterity issues or poor sight, typing or reading on a small mobile phone keypad may be challenging.

e-Commerce

What is it?

Commercial transactions conducted online, including on-line shopping and banking.

What equipment is needed?

A mobile phone, tablet or computer with data access.

When is it suitable?

- When it is convenient for you to buy or sell anything available online.
- It can be a mobile service so you can use it while you are out.

What are the limitations?

- It is not a real-time communication option.
- If you have dexterity issues or poor sight, typing or reading on a small mobile phone keypad may be challenging.
- Security of personal information and payments online is important. It is important to only buy from secure sites. See Keeping safe while communicating online below for more safety and privacy information.

Learning how to use mainstream communications options

The Be Connected website includes easy to find information about using some of these online alternatives to phone calls. The information is text-based and the included videos are captioned.

The Be Connected Network includes organisations that support people who are deaf, hearing and/or speech impaired. Network members can offer friendly help and advice and can be contacted on 1300 795 897.

The Be Connected website can be found at https://beconnected.esafety.gov.au/.

Keeping safe while communicating online

The Be Connected website has a lot of useful information about communicating safely and securely online. The Be Connected website is at https://beconnected.esafety.gov.au/.