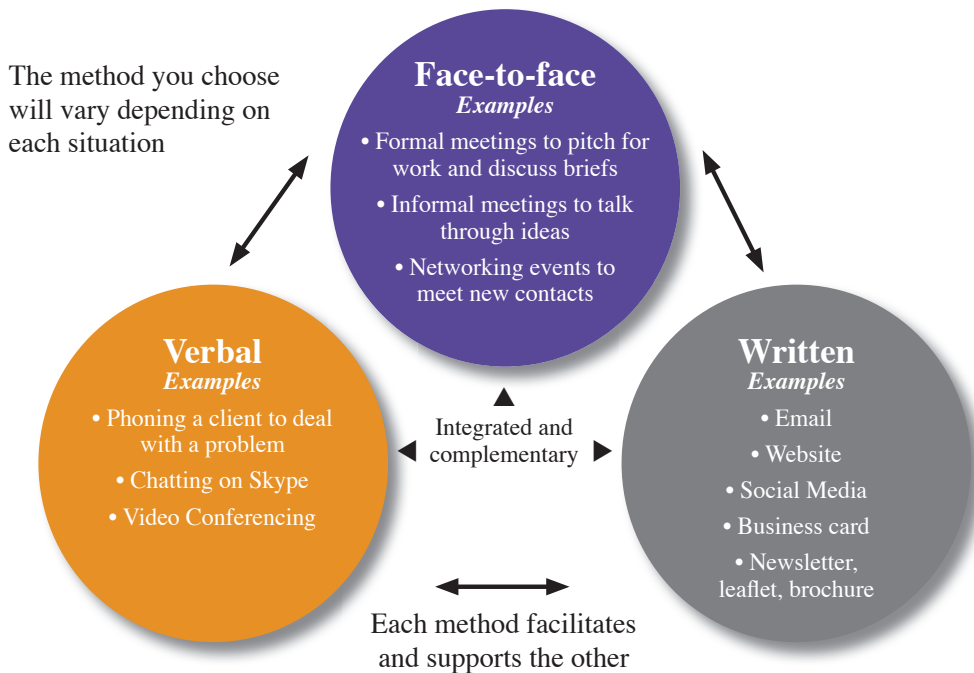


Improving communication

There are several ways to communicate with your clients using face-to-face, verbal and written methods.

METHODS OF COMMUNICATION



As a freelance, it's crucial to secure new work and build long-term relationships to ensure work continuity and support career progress. Clear communication can help you do this.

Some useful tips follow:

Horses for courses

To make the most impact and achieve the best results, it is important to use the most appropriate method of communication for each situation.

This will depend on what you want to achieve in the context of your client's agenda, which includes their objectives, availability, and preferred method of communication. For example:

- You want to pitch several new ideas to a potential client: you arrange a one-hour formal meeting with that client (face-to-face).

- You think it's time to 'touch base' with a client as you want to find out more about what they are doing currently and where you could fit in: you arrange an informal 1-hour meeting over coffee (face-to-face).
- You've just emailed your client with an important document: you ring them to ensure they've received it on time (verbal).
- A problem has arisen that you think your client will be unhappy about: you ring them to let them know what's happened and offer a solution (verbal).
- You've agreed to do a piece of work for a client: you email them attaching a document that confirms terms and conditions (written).
- Your client has asked you a straightforward question via email: you email them the answer (written).

There are many different reasons and opportunities to communicate. Whether face-to-face, verbal or written, the same basic principles apply to achieve the best results:

Assess your audience

You want to get a good idea of what the person or people you are communicating with potentially most needs from you. Ask yourself:

- "What's in it for them?"
- "What benefits would they get from commissioning me?"
- "What's my 'unique selling point/s' in relation to this particular audience?"
- "What makes me stand out from the competition?"
- "What are the most important things to tell this particular client (my key messages)?"

When you know the answers to the above, you will be better able to decide on which form of communication will work best and what you need to do in preparation.

Know your objectives

If you know what you want to achieve, you're more likely to maximise the potential of each communication opportunity, whether it be a lengthy meeting, brief telephone call or quick email. Ask yourself:

- What do I want to get as a result of what I say or write?
- What do I want the audience to do as a result of what I say or write?

Prepare the content

This might take 10 seconds or 10 days – depending on what you are communicating, the way you choose to communicate and how important getting a good result is to you.

For example, if you are meeting with a potential client to pitch some new ideas, it might take you a good chunk of time to work out what you are going to say and what examples you would need to help bring this to life.

It's just like completing any other piece of work (performing or writing a book for example). What you put in beforehand (the rehearsals and drafts) is a crucial factor in achieving a positive result. You wouldn't just turn up to a gig without knowing what you were going to sing with your instruments left at home in a cupboard. Likewise, you wouldn't turn up to a meeting without knowing what you were going to say and how you were going to highlight your delivery – unless, at best, you want to waste the opportunity or, at worst, bomb.

Effective delivery

The effort you've put in beforehand will help you communicate clearly and make a positive impression. It will also help you feel more confident and calm your nerves.

Face-to-face communication

If you're sufficiently prepared, you'll be much more confident and this will also help you achieve the results you want.

Remember to:

- Stay focused: your aim is to get your main points across and ensure that your audience understands them. Try not to let the conversation drift.
- Mention the benefits that you provide, i.e. let people know why you are the right person for the job. For example, you've been successful at this sort of work before, you're adaptable, you can hit the ground running, you have unparalleled experience, specialised knowledge etc.
- Watch the time: you need to make sure you convey your main points within the agreed time limit. Prioritise what you want to say in order of importance so you convey your most important messages first (in line with your most important objectives).
- Aim to build rapport:
 - Speak in the language of the audience
 - Avoid jargon
 - Dress appropriately
 - Use positive body language
 - Ask questions to find out more and show interest
 - Probe for areas/people that you have in common.

Verbal communication (telephone)

Here the same basic principles apply. However, you may have even less time to achieve your objectives so you need to be doubly sure that you know the purpose of the call.

Like the face-to-face method, communication via the telephone provides you with an opportunity for a two-way conversation and allows you to build rapport. However, you lose the observational element so even more depends on what you say, listening carefully and the way you use your voice. Remember:

- Speak clearly
- Your voice sounds ‘flatter’ on the phone so you may need to work harder to keep the listener engaged: tone, intonation and inflection are important.

Written communication

There are numerous forms of written business communication from quick one-line emails to complicated proposals.

Unlike creative writing, devices like building suspense and long descriptive passages to add colour don’t work in business writing.

While you are certainly aiming to grab the readers’ attention and spark their interest, people haven’t got the time or inclination to wade through pages of superfluous information to get to what’s important to them. If you waffle, people just stop reading.

Aim to:

- Get to the point: with a clear ‘subject matter’ in a short email for example or a concise headline and attention-grabbing introduction in a longer piece.
- Put the most important issues first: structure your paragraphs to descend in order of importance – most important first, least important last.
- Make it easy to read:
 - Use sub-headlines and bullet points to break up the text and highlight important points
 - Use short sentences
 - Cover one point per paragraph.
- Make it easy to understand:
 - Don’t assume people know what you’re talking about because they work in the same industry
 - Avoid jargon
 - Provide explanatory examples and information where appropriate.
- Request action: if you want an answer or an action as a result, let the reader know what you would like them to do and by when.

Follow up

Take control

Even if you've asked your client to do something as a result of your communication, be proactive when it comes to moving things on in the right direction. If they don't contact you, contact them to find out what the hold up is.

Deliver on your promises

If you've say you're going to do something, for example, supply further information, then do it and do it by the agreed deadline. Otherwise, you are communicating the message that you are unreliable.

Improving communication - example

THE SCENARIO

The following scenario illustrates how effective communication (or the lack of it) has a big impact on the impression you make and the results you achieve.

*Note: this scenario was designed to be played out 'live' in a recent FEU workshop based on improving communication to support career progress. However, the written version below will help you to see where improvements can be made. While the following example focuses on an actor, director and writer, the principles apply generally.

See overleaf...

The scenario and a bit of background	Comment
<p>A post 'first night' play reception in a theatre bar. The focus is on three people:</p> <p>Alyn - the play's director. (The play is called 'Generation Gap' and examines how adults and children view each other and the misunderstandings that take place because of the 'gap' in experience).</p> <p>Miranda - an unknown yet up and coming writer who is just about to embark on a piece of work with Alyn</p> <p>They are standing chatting together.</p> <p>Kate - an actor who wants to approach Alyn as she recognises him and thinks he would be a useful contact. She has just arrived from a day's temping. She is nervous, tired and generally finds networking/mingling very difficult. Also, she's out of sorts as she feels that she hasn't been achieving much recently. While she has had several small roles in various TV shows, plays and also delivered several workshops for children with learning difficulties, in the last six months, work has been sporadic and she's frustrated on several levels, e.g., lack of work, lack of progress, lack of money and high stress levels).</p> <p>*(The scene and background are exactly the same for both negative and positive outcomes).</p>	<p><i>This 'scenario' represents any face-to-face encounter, i.e., it could just as well be a one-to-one meeting or a potential 'networking' event such as a conference or company party.</i></p>

Scenario (negative version)	COMMENT
<p>Kate is standing in the background while Alyn and Miranda chat.</p> <p>She's obviously nervous and feeling uncomfortable (arms are crossed, shoulders slumped, perplexed expression, moving from foot to foot. You can see the woes of the world are on her shoulders)</p>	<p><i>Here, Kate's inner turmoil (manifested in her negative body language) is saying to her audience 'do not approach me'. Also, she is making herself feel worse as she is focusing on her negative thoughts and emotions rather than what she can control in the matter at hand.</i></p>
<p>After a minute or so she approaches the couple and stands near them facing Alyn, side on from Miranda. She doesn't make eye contact with them - just stands there nervously hoping they will notice her.</p>	<p><i>Kate needs to be assertive here and approach the couple directly.</i></p>
<p>Alyn and Miranda continue to chat for a few seconds (uncomfortably aware of Kate's presence but half way through their sentence). Alyn looks up and says: "Hi"</p>	<p><i>Kate leaves the onus on the couple to include her which makes them feel uncomfortable. Luckily Alyn is polite - they could just as easily have ignored her. Also, Kate 'cuts out' Miranda which may be perceived as being rude.</i></p>
<p>Kate (still crossed arms with a very tense smile): "Hi, I'm an actor and I wanted to say hello".</p>	<p><i>Introductions mean taking the opportunity to shake hands, smile and make eye-contact - confirming the initial contact and building rapport immediately. Also, Kate's 'closed' body language is a negative subliminal message, e.g., "I'm</i></p>

	<i>nervous and have no confidence." She also fails to mention her name.</i>
The couple look at each other and smile (an 'oh lord, here we go again' smile)	<i>Kate has failed to engage the audience.</i>
Alyn (quite friendly and smiling): "OK. Well... hello. Let me introduce you to my colleague Miranda Gavin".	
Kate (turns her head with strained smile): "Hi." Kate turns back to look at Alyn (she is too close to him at this point and invading his body space)	<i>At this point, Kate should have turned to Miranda to include her in the conversation. It's important to make eye contact and include 'the group'.</i>
Miranda: "Nice to meet you. And you are?"	<i>Once again, Kate leaves the onus on others to make the introductions.</i>
Kate: "Kate Western."	<i>Here, Kate could have given more information and asked a question to stimulate conversation and find out more to enable her to build rapport.</i>
Alyn: "Did you enjoy the performance?"	
Kate: "Yeah, it was quite...good."	<i>Kate didn't really enjoy the play but, while you don't have to be sycophantic, it's important not to risk being offensive. Also, when asked a question, it is a good time to demonstrate</i>

	<i>knowledge and experience or, at least, enthusiasm in your answer.</i>
Alyn (guffawing): "You don't sound too sure. My feathers will be ruffled before tomorrow's reviews at this rate."	<i>Luckily, Alyn and Miranda are in a good mood and do not take offence. However, it's important not to put people on the defensive.</i>
<p>Miranda: "You won't get any bad reviews. Anyway, nothing could be as bad as my first review. Do you remember? It took me about three months to show my face in public again."</p> <p>Alyn and Miranda laugh</p> <p>Miranda: "Oh, excuse me. I've just got to take this phone call. Be back in a sec."</p>	<p><i>Kate should join in here rather than stand there like a 'rabbit in the headlights'. Meeting people can be intimidating but, to raise confidence levels and to project a positive side to the audience, it's better to get into the mind set of "I'm an equal with something valuable to offer".</i></p> <p><i>It's true that some people are tricky to deal with but it's important to develop a thicker skin so we can shrug off unsuccessful encounters and move on to achieve our goals.</i></p>
Alyn: "So Kate, what have I seen you in?"	<i>Once again, Kate leaves Alyn to make conversation.</i>
Kate (sighing). "Well...I haven't done much recently. It's all a bit of a struggle at the moment."	<p><i>This may well be true. But, whining to people (that you want to impress) isn't productive.</i></p> <p><i>If Kate had set her objectives beforehand, she could have found a few things in common with Alyn to talk about. For example, one of her</i></p>

	<i>key messages and a good way to build rapport would have been to mention that she has acted with children.</i>
Alyn: "Yes, it can be tough I know. What sort of things have you done in the past?"	
Kate: "Nothing you'd have heard of... a few minor parts on TV, some radio voice overs and some workshops for children. I'm forcing myself to attend more events like this to see if I can get to know more people and generate a bit more work."	<i>It's important to avoid putting yourself down. You don't have to be arrogant to let other people know that you are proud and passionate of your work. No-one wants to work with a wet blanket or somebody who isn't confident that they can do a good job.</i>
Alyn: "Oh dear."	<i>Kate is starting to 'bring Alyn down'.</i>
Kate (building up into a stream of black consciousness): "Yes, and it's so expensive to live in London. I don't really know if I'll be able to last much longer - especially with the recession and the prices of everything going up." (Looks down at floor) It's really depressing actually... "It's alright for rich people because they can afford to hang on but if you haven't got a silver spoon in your mouth, it doesn't matter how talented you are."	<i>Kate has taken Alyn's sympathy as a cue to vent - this is inappropriate.</i> <i>Kate is so 'caught up in herself' that she has missed a real opportunity to ask Alyn more about his play and mention her work - a subject that fascinates her and she is actually very good at.</i> <i>It's also risky to air personal views that might be offensive, e.g., Alyn could have a 'silver spoon' background.</i>
Alyn: "Oh chin up. Admittedly, it's very difficult for	<i>Luckily Alyn is a compassionate person.</i>

<p>everyone in the business at the moment. But it's rarely easy. You certainly have to be passionate and determined to do well."</p> <p>"Funnily enough, I've just read a Bruce Springstein biography. He came from a God-awful background and still managed to fight his way up to the top."</p>	<p><i>However, Kate is starting to wear him down - the reverse of what she needs to be doing.</i></p>
<p>"Yes, but that was ages ago. The hard thing about being an actor - especially if you're a woman - is that you always have to pretend to be 'up' even when you're not.</p> <p>Alyn raises his eyebrows in surprise thinking: "What? If that's her being 'up', goodness knows what she's like when she 'down'."</p>	<p><i>Kate now needs to 'get a grip'. Presenting yourself as a 'victim' is a real turn off.</i></p> <p><i>Also, Kate's introspection means that she hasn't realised that she is having a negative impact on Alyn. She's failed to observe, listen or promote a two-way conversation.</i></p>
<p>Kate: "The riots brought me down too. I found it very hard to focus for several days after that."</p>	<p><i>Kate is now going from losing an opportunity to making a bad impression.</i></p>
<p>Alyn (visibly slumping and looking around for Miranda): "Yes, it was shocking but I did find it uplifting to see lots of people taking to the streets to put right the damage. I live in Clapham so I even went down to join in which is so unlike me."</p>	<p><i>Most of us have been in situations where we can't wait to get away from a particular person - often because they talk at us rather than with this. Remember, effective communication relies on a 'two-way' flow.</i></p>
<p>Miranda (re-entering - Alyn makes big, exasperated eyes at her): "What are we talking about?"</p>	
<p>Kate (continuing to talk to Alyn and barely acknowledging</p>	<p><i>Kate could have used the fact that they both live</i></p>

<p>Miranda): I live in Clapham too. You just don't expect to see that disruption in London."</p>	<p><i>in Clapham to open up the conversation. Also, the close proximity might make it easier to meet up again in the future if she had thought about it. She's also cut out Miranda again - losing an opportunity to make a new contact and now appearing rude.</i></p>
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<p>Alyn (resigned): "Indeed".</p>	<p><i>People may only have a few minutes to talk. Even if they are enjoying your company, they have their own agenda. This means it's important to develop the awareness to read the situation accurately. Kate's presentation of herself (including lack of self-awareness and awareness of the reactions of others) means they can't wait to get away.</i></p>
<p>Miranda: "Sorry to break up the party, but we need to be off to meet a few other people now."</p>	
<p>Alyn (hastily moving to exit): "Yes, better not keep them waiting. Hope all goes well."</p>	
<p>Miranda: "Bye then."</p>	
<p>Kate: "Yes, bye."</p>	<p><i>Kate could have asked to swap business cards here. However, by this stage, her audience</i></p>

	<i>would understandably have been likely to avoid providing a method of future communication.</i>
Miranda (as they leave): "What was her name?"	
Alyn: "God knows but she could suck the energy out of a power plant. I need a drink." Exit	<i>Certainly not the impression Kate would have hoped for.</i>
Kate (on her mobile): "You never guess what. I've just met Alyn Bellin, the director. I'm going to email him in the next couple of weeks to see if we can meet up for a proper chat."	<i>Kate fails to realise that she has made a bad impression. She didn't gain agreement for future contact. Even if she did manage to find contact details, it's unlikely that Alyn would want to see her again. She has set herself up for future disappointment: if she attempted to contact Alyn, she'd be unlikely to receive a reply which would set her off on another negative (blame the world) train of thought. While we can't get it right every time, self-realisation of where we can improve is important. Also, even if the meeting had gone well, two weeks is too long a time to leave before future contact - carpe diem!</i>

The scenario (positive version)

The background scenario is exactly the same as the 'negative' version above. However, Kate has a different attitude and approach. She: has decided to focus on her objectives: meeting Alyn, making a good impression and possibly arranging future contact.

has thought about what Alyn does in advance - in this instance, they have both had experience in adult/children related theatre (this could turn out to be one of her key messages)

has chosen to put her problems aside for these short moments. is still nervous (most people - however experienced - are in these circumstances). However, she is determined to put her best foot forward. She takes her suit jacket off to fit with the more 'casual look' of the crowd. Then, she takes a deep breath, smiles, straightens her shoulders and heads assertively towards the couple.

When she reaches the couple, she stands so that she is centred between both of them and extends her hand to Alyn, making contact and smiling (the couple automatically looks at her).

Kate: "Hi. Sorry to interrupt your conversation but I'm a big fan of your work and would kick myself if I missed this opportunity to say a hello. I'm Kate Willoughby. I'm an actor.

Here, Kate's direct, confident and cheery approach is rewarded with a positive reaction.

Alyn shakes hands with Kate automatically as she has taken control by offering her hand first. Contact is made (we have lift off - Kate has achieved one of her objectives - meeting Alyn).

<p>Kate smiles at Miranda and looks back at Alyn.</p> <p>Alyn: "Oh, no problem. This is Miranda Gavin."</p>	<p><i>Kate includes Miranda in the possible conversation.</i></p>
<p>Kate (shaking hands with Miranda): "Good to meet you both. Do you work together?"</p>	<p><i>Kate asks a question to initiate the conversation and to find out more to see if they have anything in common.</i></p> <p><i>Kate steps back slightly so that she's not invading their body space and also so she can include both people in the conversation. Her body language is 'open'.</i></p>
<p>Alyn: "Not so far but we're actually hatching a master plan at this very moment. Miranda is going to write something wonderful for me."</p> <p>They all laugh</p>	<p><i>Kate is building rapport and getting a positive reaction. She's also finding out more about future plans.</i></p>
<p>Miranda: "Oh, excuse me. I've just got to take this phone call. Be back in a sec."</p> <p>Kate smiles at her as she leaves</p>	<p><i>Kate is polite and inclusive which helps to create a warm and friendly atmosphere.</i></p>
<p>Kate (to Alyn): "That sounds intriguing. What's it about?"</p>	<p><i>Questions draw people out and give a subliminal message that you are interested in them.</i></p>
<p>Alyn (joking): "If I told you, I'd have to kill you."</p>	
<p>Kate (joking): "Your secret is safe with me. Also, I'm a black</p>	<p><i>Kate is sharing the joke (building empathy and</i></p>

<p>belt so you wouldn't have a chance."</p> <p>They laugh</p>	<p><i>rapport) and they are both starting to enjoy themselves.</i></p>
<p>Alyn: "Well, it might be a TV version of the play or something completely different. It's a work in progress, or, in laymen's terms, we haven't got much of a clue yet."</p> <p>They laugh</p>	<p><i>Kate has encouraged Alyn to provide information (finding out that he is undertaking a new production will help her tailor this conversation and future communication to his needs with the aim of showing that she is the perfect person for future roles).</i></p>
<p>Alyn: "Did you enjoy the performance by the way?"</p>	
<p>Kate (nodding her head earnestly): "I thought the tension between the adults and children was incredibly well portrayed...totally unsettling at times in fact."</p>	<p><i>Kate chooses to comment on what she did like.</i></p>
<p>Alyn (smiling): "Good, that's just how we wanted you to feel. Somebody is obviously getting something right. So, what have I seen you in Kate?"</p>	<p><i>Alyn is now genuinely interested in the conversation (rather than just 'jollyng Kate along').</i></p>
<p>Kate (enthusiastically): "Well, I've been in a few TV series and done several radio voiceovers recently - I'm trying to get a diverse range of work under my belt.</p> <p>"As it happens, I've also done several workshops to help children with learning difficulties express themselves better. We had a great response and it's been incredibly satisfying. Actually I found</p>	<p><i>Kate presents her work positively - she may be going through a 'rough patch' but she has had many successes in general and this is what she focuses on. She also mentions the piece of work that she has in common with Alyn.</i></p>

<p>the play resonated with some of my experiences.”</p>	
<p>Miranda re-enters: “What are we talking about?”</p> <p>Kate turns to Miranda and smiles</p>	<p><i>Again, Kate includes Miranda in the conversation.</i></p>
<p>Alyn: “We’ve been discussing the dynamic between children and adults. Talking of which, it was very disturbing to see so many young people...kids really...involved in the riots.</p> <p>“On the other hand, it was heartening to see so many tidying up in Clapham afterwards. I went down there myself to help out as it’s just down the road from me”.</p>	
<p>Kate: “That’s a coincidence, I live in Clapham too. I’ve just done a local radio ad for a ‘Clean Up South London’ campaign.</p>	<p><i>Kate pinpoints another thing that they have in common, builds rapport and, once again, relates it to her work.</i></p>
<p>Miranda: “Sorry to break up the party, but we need to be off to meet a few other people now.”</p>	<p><i>As in the version above, Alyn and Miranda need to leave but this time because they have another appointment not because they are itching to ‘get away’.</i></p>
<p>Kate: “No problem. Let me leave you to it as I’ve got to catch up with a colleague too. Before I go, could we swap business cards as it would be great to catch up again if possible.”</p> <p>She gives them her business card and takes theirs</p>	<p><i>Kate isn’t left standing alone as if she has nowhere to go but takes their cue quickly and acts.</i></p>

	<i>Kate has made a positive move towards keeping in contact.</i>
Alyn: "Well, I'm pretty busy..."	
Kate (smiling and relaxed): "Oh, I completely understand. But if you have a spare 15 minutes and fancy a coffee... let me know. If it's ok, I'll email you in the meantime anyway with some examples of my work."	
Alyn: "Righto..."	<i>Kate achieves another objective: arranging future contact.</i>
Kate (extending her hand) "Good to meet you and enjoy your evening."	
Alyn: "You too, see you again."	
Miranda: "Bye then." As they walk away (looking at Kate's business card) "She seems nice."	
Alyn: "Yes, great energy and not too pushy. I almost invited her to supper but you know what Georgie is like - she'd be furious if she thought anyone was upstaging her."	<i>Kate achieves her final objective: making a good impression.</i>
Kate (on her mobile): "You never guess what...I've just met Alyn Bellin, the director. I'm going to email him in the next couple of days to see if we can meet up for a proper chat. I also met a writer but I	<i>Kate achieved all her objectives. She already has her next objectives in mind and intends to act promptly (while the meeting is fresh in their minds) to achieve</i>

didn't have a chance to find out much about her this time. We exchanged business cards though and I think she'll be worth contacting again too. See you later."

these. Her ultimate objective is to secure work from Alyn. However, she is aware that she needs to be pro-active and continue to communicate with Alyn - possibly over a long period of time to achieve this. Kate is aware that Miranda is also a contact worth pursuing and her deft handling of the situation has provided her with an unexpected inroad that may prove fruitful.