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E-Mail Separates Friends from Acquaintances

Looking at somebody's mailbox it is obviously not too difficult to work out who their friends are without looking at their e-mails. Volume is likely to be a pretty good guide as is whose messages they respond to.

[Science Now](#) reports that complex-systems analysts Brian Uzzi and Stefan Wuchty of Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, compared the two methods as a means of ascertaining an individual's social network. Both were shown to be equally accurate when compared to a list of friends, colleagues and acquaintances drawn up by employees of a company.

Then the researchers tried something different. They measured the time it took for a sender to respond to e-mail from different correspondents. This proved to be far more accurate than either of the other two measures, the researchers says in a paper published on [PLoS One](#).

According to Science Now the method could be taken further:

By examining precisely who had the different response times—friends, colleagues, or acquaintances—Uzzi and Wuchty uncovered a more telling pattern. It turned out that the fastest responses went to friends and that the slowest responses went to acquaintances, with colleagues somewhere in between. Having established this, the researchers could use the response times to predict who was a friend, colleague, or acquaintance without checking the employee survey at all.

According to Uzzi, it should be possible to go a step further and rank a person's friends just by peeking at their inbox and outbox and seeing who gets the fastest responses. Such information could be valuable to companies, he says, because they would be able to focus advertising on tight-knit groups of friends, among whom new advertising messages quickly build momentum. "We're often influenced by our peers; we take their actions as an indicator of what we should do," Uzzi says. "Once you know what the relationships are, you might be able to target [advertising at] a critical mass of them."

Science Now: [E-mail Reveals Your Closest Friends](#)

PLoS One: [Human Communication Dynamics in Digital Footsteps: A Study of the Agreement between Self-Reported Ties and Email Networks](#)

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