

Is Our Connectedness Causing Us to Disconnect?

There is no doubt that we are more connected today than at any time in our history. It is possible today to be connected to hundreds and even thousands of people at a time and to constantly keep everyone in our network up to date on our activities. Today's technology makes it possible to never be out of touch. Yet, it seems the more technology enabled we become the more disconnected we are.

Years ago if you wanted to keep in touch with someone you needed to make a telephone call or write to them one at a time. In order to make that call you needed to be somewhere that you could use a landline and if you didn't reach them, you may be able to leave a message if they were fortunate enough to have an answering machine. Your other choice was to actually write a letter and put it in the mail. This was true whether you were contacting a family member, friend or wanted to communicate something to someone at work.

Then, along came the cell phone and all the sudden we could now talk to anyone, anytime from anywhere (except those pesky dead zones.) It was now possible to talk to your sales agent while they are in the field, or reach the boss while they are out of the office to ask that critical question that just couldn't wait until they got back to the office. We could also now stay connected to the office from our car or in the evening or weekend and while on vacation with the family. All the sudden we became connected to the office with the cell phone as our umbilical cord. Now there was no need to go anywhere without having someone on the phone. I know people who pull out of their driveway dialing the phone while backing out of the garage.

Pretty soon, text messaging and instant messaging offered the chance to say something without actually needing to have a conversation. We could control the conversation, reach more people at a time, and say things we may not be willing to say if we had to hear the persons voice or actually see their face. Today, we all laugh about our kids who text each other while they are in the same room. Is it really funny though? Suddenly making a phone call and having a conversation with a live human being became uncool and uncomfortable.

Now we can add to this our addiction to social networking. Twitter is the new rage. Nobody seems to know exactly how many Twitter users there are, but estimates are there are more than one million active users who Tweet more than three million messages a day. Now you can say something pithy in 140 characters or less to anyone who is willing to read it. It suddenly is possible to tell all our 'friends' what we had for lunch, what meeting we are heading to or how we feel at the moment. No need to engage in discussion – you can share your feeling, thoughts, emotions, benign activities anytime of the day or night and 'communicate' anything you want.

In addition to Twitter, there are over 200 million Facebook users, 191 million MySpace users and more than 29 million Friendster users in the world. Add to that the millions of

users on LinkedIn, Plaxo, Classmates.com and all the other social networking sites and it seems everyone is technology crazy these days. It is also predicted that more than half the world will have a cell phone by the end of 2009. It seems that with so much connectedness going on it should be making our lives easier and allow for great communication in our society.

So why is it that there seems to be so much discourse and miscommunication happening on a regular basis? Have we become a society that uses technology to avoid having meaningful discussions that allow for relationship building, sharing of ideas and reasonable debate that helps solve problems instead of creating them?

Technology clearly has a place in our life these days and can be utilized in many ways to keep people informed and up to date. Businesses can find many effective and efficient ways to use technology to keep team members, customers, vendors and others up to date more timely and effectively than always making a phone call or mailing a letter. The question is whether we can develop or maintain a relationship or manage conflict and crises through Tweets, Wall Posts, and texting.

Every day I talk to and hear from people who seem to use technology as a way to avoid personal contact. I know people who wait until they know someone will not be home or are away from the office to call so they can leave a message and not have to talk to them. By making the call, they can now check off their mental list that they have kept in touch. People respond to a voicemail with an email or text message. The Tweet or Facebook Wall post keeps everyone up to date so the guilt of feeling like they should call or visit someone and talk to them is removed.

Technology makes it easy to tell people what you have been up to, but don't let it replace personal contact to build and maintain relationships. We are at great risk with our youth in losing the ability to do business and create lasting relationships other than through technology. Many more problems are solved, ideas created and relationships strengthened through personal contact than through the cold, impersonal, mass-distributed contact of technology.

Go ahead and send that Tweet, or make your Wall post or send that text message, but also make some time to call someone you want to keep in touch with, care about or have an interest in maintaining a strong relationship with. Set up a time for a cup of coffee together or to 'do lunch' or just spend five minutes letting them know that you care. Businesses are built on strong relationships; if you want to differentiate yourself in today's high tech world, pick up the phone or hand write a personal note. Don't let your connectedness cause you to disconnect.

To Your Success,
Dennis