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The Social Evolution

Staff Writers

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My father owned a furniture and appliance store in Fort Worth for 37 years. So, naturally, my childhood misconception was thinking all families received a new RCA or Zenith television every few months. Eventually, I realized Easy Tradin' Tom was selling our home models at a discount to customers seeking a better price. His mantra: "I have this exact one, and will give it to you for a lot less."

Mom's favorite part of this arrangement was enjoying rooms filled with beautiful furniture, if only until someone else bought them. For the five siblings, our boondoggle was having the best electronics in the neighborhood. I remember my older brothers' friends cramming into our house to watch The Beatles on The Ed Sullivan Show. (That's a pretty vivid memory when you consider I was four.)

A decade later, I awakened on Christmas morning to a recurring "ding...ding...ding...ding." Venturing into the family room, I saw my father and brother holding controllers and playing a game on TV. Santa had delivered Pong. For hours, we would watch that little white dot go back and forth on the screen. What amazing technology! Future cutting edge gifts from Dad included a CB radio, an eight-track, and a video disc player...but Pong forever will be the greatest.

From Dings to Tweets

All this probably sounds silly to those Gen Xers and Millennials so adept at using opposable thumbs as extensions of their brains. However, when Space Invaders was the apogee of high tech, circa 1980, only Bill Gates or Steve Jobs could have envisioned how constantly-in-contact the planet's occupants would become. What started with car phones and evolved into email is now a non-stop opportunity to stay in touch with anyone anywhere.

Those printers thinking this fad will pass quicker than you can say "mood rings" might want to attend a high school event and watch kids in the stands texting their friends...who are seated a few feet away! Those are your customers' future customers, and it's essential to understand they do things differently than you.

Of course, the big question for business owners is: What's the strategic advantage of riding this fast rising wave? Are all these ways to connect effective for increasing sales or reducing costs, or simply the latest pet rock: Cute for awhile, but creating no long term value? My belief is—much like cable and satellite forever changed the way we watch television—this brave new world of communicating continuously with your audience will provide positive results for those who understand how to effectively utilize the medium.

Here is a perfect example: In March, at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, doctors performed brain surgery on a 47-year-old patient. While those procedures happen daily, this one included a first. The two surgeons posted in-progress updates and answered questions via the Internet as 1,900 distance-learning medical school students watched video uploaded to YouTube.

“I felt like I was right there...in there,” one of the students told ABC News. “I felt like they were going to ask me to hold the retractor for them, because that’s the medical student’s job.” Benefits: Reach a broader audience, eliminate travel costs, communicate in students’ preferred language. “It’s a generation skilled in instant, interactive, interpersonal communication and feedback,” said surgeon Steven Kalkanis. “If medical education is going to be as relevant and effective as possible, it needs to keep pace.”

Beam Me Up, Scotty

How might interconnectivity evolve in the press room? Probably not by your posting play-by-play that describes the output of your digital copier. So, let’s begin your education with the basics: Where are the places to be seen in the social networking universe? These are three free access services you’ll want to understand:

Facebook

Along with My Space, this popular community is where people update their life stories...sort of an in-progress autobiography of where I’ve been, where I am, and where I’m going. (Hint: If you have access to a teenager ask them for a tour...because chances are they have a page.) From my viewpoint, Facebook is mostly for entertainment purposes. While connecting with friends you haven’t heard from in decades is fun, the business value may be limited.

LinkedIn

Remember the movie “Six Degrees of Separation” and the similar theory everyone in Hollywood is somehow connected to Kevin Bacon? This business exchange proves those assumptions correct. After posting personal information (think: curriculum vitae), you seek to develop links to trusted business contacts. In this case, one plus one equals three: Your relationships expand through introductions to your connections’ connections.

Twitter

This is a simple concept. Members post “tweets”—140 character or less comments that update “followers” on what they’re doing/working on at any moment. (Some networks are large; Shaq has more than 450,000 keeping up with his activities!) The greatest benefit is when those following you “retweet” your messages to their audience. That way, more and more people are exposed to your ideas and observations, and your circle of influence grows through an outward ripple effect.

A word of caution: Social networking is a clock eater. So, you’ll want to regulate how much you engage. I coach clients on the “Dr. Pepper Approach” to managing email—only checking it at 10, 2, and 4—which was the soft drink’s long-time slogan. And I recommend the same here. Set aside specific time and stick to it, or you’ll find yourself falling further behind each day.

No one knows where all this interactive connectivity is heading, however, there is one thing of which I am certain. In 2045, when my kids are sitting around reminiscing about childhood, the youngest will say, “Remember when we thought Facebook was high tech?” Then she’ll ask her clone to display holograms of the hottest gift of the Christmas season: Lava lamps.

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