

The Digital Divide

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Connecting with people in a social-media-crazy world

The past decade has seen rapid changes in how people create and cultivate relationships, and smartphones have ignited a mobile revolution. The tools we use to communicate have forever changed, and now people have access to an unlimited number of contacts, right at their fingertips. Meanwhile, nearly every business conference has offered a plethora of training sessions on how to best leverage social media.

But have we really created more meaningful relationships, or are we just substituting likes, links, shares and follows for real human-to-human connections? Are our lives better with all the digital tools that are now so common?

A Growing Disconnect

People are experiential beings, and we bond with others through shared experiences. The problem is not in the tools we use, but in how many people overlook the human side of relationships.

This disconnect is never more evident than at in-person events. People are focused on their technology instead of talking with the people seated next to them. It is not uncommon to see a line of people waiting for coffee during a networking break, all with their attention on their phones or tablets. People zone out at meals, when talking around the table is a key time to share ideas with other attendees. Instead, they check Facebook, email and online communities to see what is happening with people who are not in the room.

Social media and our digital devices are wonderful tools that can assist everyone in being better connected and more productive, but they also can be a distraction that leaves people more isolated and causes them to miss out on making meaningful connections.

True Networking

Networking is the main reason people cite for attending a conference, trade show, convention or seminar, but once present, they fail to take the actions necessary to meet new people and instigate the beginnings of a long-term and mutually beneficial relationship. If connecting is the purpose that drives people to be present for these gatherings, we must find ways to establish an atmosphere that encourages people to engage.

Let's use phone etiquette as an example. When is it polite to look at our phones? We often find it rude when others are disengaged while we talk to them, but when we do it ourselves we call it multitasking. Our society is allowing the rude behavior of people checking their phones while engaged in face-to-face conversations.

I recently attended a lunch with two professionals. One of them had his phone out and was reviewing emails and texts the whole time we dined. The other put his phone away. It was clear who was more engaged in our discussion.

Many conference attendees say impromptu “hallway conversations” with peers are the highlight of an event, and yet rarely do people initiate these chats. This engagement will not happen by accident, as too many people have their phones in between themselves and those they are talking with. Anyone who wants more engagement while at a live event must take ownership by starting conversations with those around them. Getting others to look up and talk is an important skill to learn.

There are many apps that help people connect at conferences, but mostly they just push people back onto their phones. We cannot get away from social media and electronic devices, nor should we, but we do need to quit thinking that social media can replace the power of a personal business relationship and real conversations. There are no shortcuts to getting people to connect. Much like with online dating, there still has to be the real face-to-face interactions if the outcome is a meaningful relationship. The most successful people have a focus on the human experiences everywhere they go.

Face-to-Face Communication Wins

For years, there was a concern that online communities and the internet would replace the need for associations and live events. Today, meetings are thriving in spite of digital offerings. To maximize your time at these events, you must move the focus away from digital and back toward human connections. Online tools are there to facilitate more human engagement, not replace it.

If face-to-face meetings existed solely for data, we could simply read whitepapers. The experiences you share with the other attendees are more important now than ever before, as the need for people as a conduit for opportunity can never be replaced by a digital connection.

The next time you are at a conference, or any type of live gathering, leave your phone in your pocket or purse during all social events and networking breaks. You might just make a connection in the real world.

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