

Economic Development Insight

Facing the Mountain of Social Networking

By Joan Bethell

Without divulging my age (I'm as old as my tongue and a little bit older than my teeth, for those who feel the need to know), being a Baby Boomer (born 1943-60), I can relate to users of technology equipment at the level of the Jitterbug phones.

I have what's known as a 'smart' phone and I'm fascinated with being able to access the internet and retrieve my email messages through a hand-held device. However, I'm not like some of the Gen Yers (born 1980-99) whose thumbs seem to disappear as they fly across miniature keyboards. My grand-daughter tells me she has school friends who can sneak-read a message and then respond using one hand while it's in their pocket!

Then there's the language barrier. "Text messaging uses SMS (short message service) language or Textese (also known as chatspeak, txt, txtk, texting language or txt talk), a term for the abbreviations and slang most commonly used." It evolved from the shorthand used in internet chatrooms due to the small number of characters allowed in a text message and the small keyboards on mobile phones.

Gen Xers (born 1961-79) straddle the fence when it comes to the latest communications technology. Some wholeheartedly embrace it, while others relate more to the Boomers and feel disconnected from it. The result is that the generation gap seems even wider than before, mostly due to the older generations' lack of desire or willingness to re-train in the new technologies and modes of communication. It's our responsibility to learn and connect because communication technologies aren't static but continuing to evolve.

In a recent article, I spoke about strategic doing (action) in open networks, finding new ways of thinking together, guiding purposeful conversations and developing strategies that translate ideas into actions quickly. This requires exploring the many and varied new media and communication avenues that have been created in recent years but, for technological idiots like me, the task is daunting.

Many are familiar with the concept of 'blogging,' where someone initiates discussion by regularly posting commentary, graphics, video or event details, but the world of interactive electronic communication has grown way beyond that. Here are just a few examples.

Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn are samples of very large social networking sites through which "users can join networks organized by city, workplace, school, and region to connect and interact with other people. People can also add friends and send them messages, and update their personal profiles to notify friends about themselves."

Ning sites are smaller, more focused social sites, which cater to specific membership bases. Members of the group can "post" comments, photos and videos that pertain to the group's interest. The Lintonian and the Greene County Citizens' Academy both have Ning sites. (<http://lintonian.ning.com> is open to all and the Citizens' Academy site is for its graduates.)

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Then there's the world of Twitter, "a free micro-blogging service that enables its users to send and read other users' updates known as *tweets*. Tweets are short messages (up to 140 characters) that are displayed on the user's profile page and delivered to other users who have subscribed to them (known as *followers*). Senders can restrict delivery to those in their circle of friends or, by default, allow anybody to access them." It's like text messaging when delivered to your cell phone but the message may be shared with, and responded to by, many – all in real time.

Bea Fields, executive coach to corporate America and author of 'Edge! A Leadership Story,' a finalist in the National Best Book Awards, posted an article about why all leaders (business and community) should use Twitter. (www.edge-book.com/blog/if-you-are-a-leader-the-10-reasons-you-should-use-twitter) She cites ten main reasons:

- To build a sense of community
- To get messages out quickly
- To listen
- To create a snowball effect
- To bring visibility to your blog
- To get customer feedback
- To show your human side
- To educate the public about your company and your culture
- To facilitate research and development
- To learn about the latest/greatest advancements in technology

So, the bottom line is that, whether willingly or kicking-and-screaming, we owe it to ourselves to get more familiar with the current communication technologies, for no other reason than to be able to stay in touch with our younger family members. Beyond that, for me at least, it's a necessity, as I strive to reach, and engage in 'strategic doing,' all age groups within the county.

(Above quotes are from Wikipedia.)

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