

GIBBS & SOELL

# Insight

FOR MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS

June 2009

## Man or Machine: Retaining the Human Element

Communications have come long way since Alexander Graham Bell's historic utterance over the telephone, "Mr. Watson — Come here — I want to see you."

With the technology of today, Bell could text his assistant Watson, e-mail him, send an instant message, submit a tweet, or poke him on Facebook. Technology has vastly improved the ability and speed with which we can communicate, so much so that speaking to Watson, much less seeing him face-to-face, might be well down the list of Bell's priorities.

With all the advancements of the digital era, however, there is a fundamental element of communication slipping away — the personal touch. Humans are social beings; forming relationships is a basic and critical part of human behavior. In business, it's at the heart of a successful organization's connections to its stakeholders and customers.

We risk losing the shared laughter, welcoming handshake and other emotive actions that the virtual business world is unable to replicate—and that shape the foundation of a trusting relationship.

### Unexpected Bugs from Bill Gates

Even with their mastery of words and images, marketers and PR communicators know that developing a face-to-face relationship takes a voice over the phone or words in an e-mail and makes them real.

Susan RoAne, author of "Face to Face: How to Reclaim the Personal Touch in a Digital World," suggests we use technology as a tool to share facts, figures and data, not as a replacement for face-to-face contact. "When we use technology to avoid human interaction, we

may save time, but we lose out on the opportunity to build rapport, trust and connections, as well as the unexpected benefits that happen in the face-to-face space."

Retired Microsoft chief Bill Gates, arguably the world's best known technology geek, understands how compelling personal interaction can be.

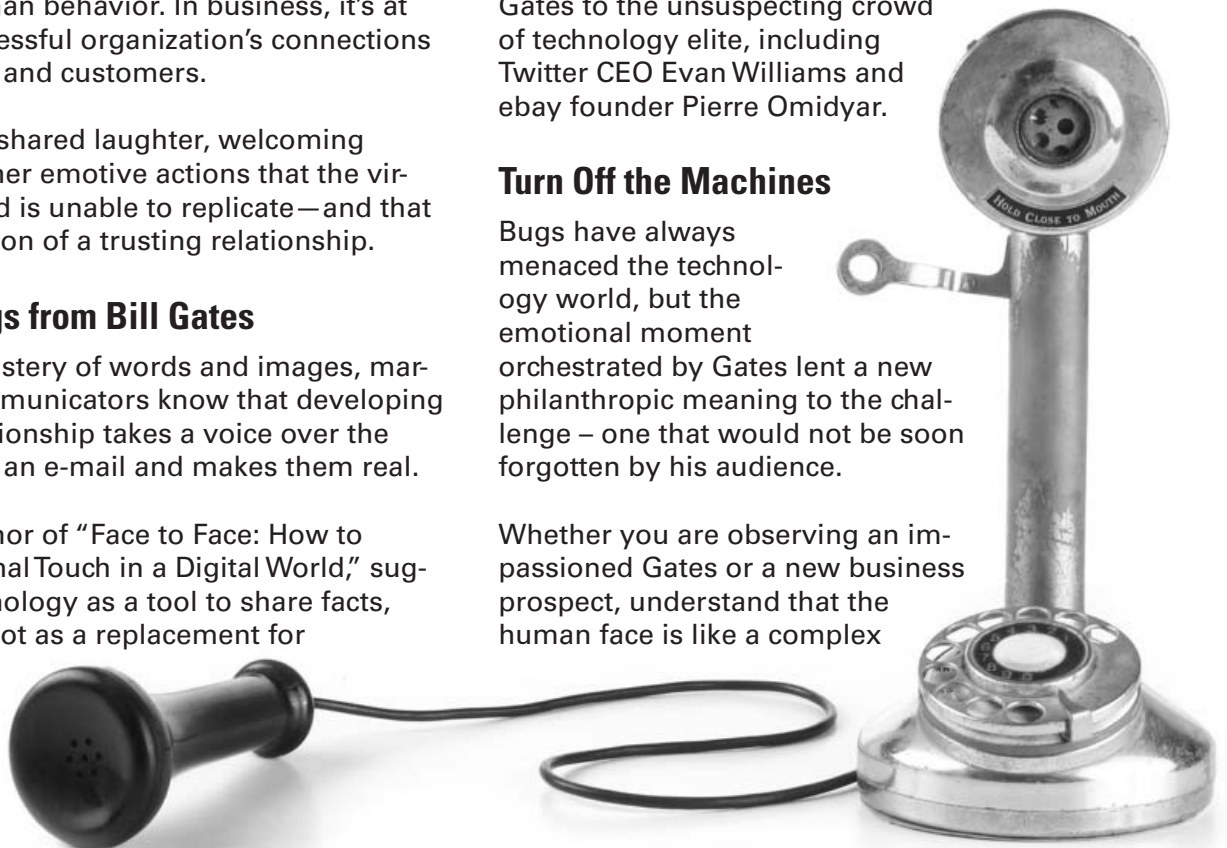
During his keynote address at the 2009 gathering of TED, the Technology Entertainment Design conference, Gates opened a jar full of harmless mosquitoes and released them into a stunned audience of educators, scientists and business leaders to drive home the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's plea to increase funding for malaria vaccine research.

"Not only poor people should experience this," said Gates to the unsuspecting crowd of technology elite, including Twitter CEO Evan Williams and ebay founder Pierre Omidyar.

### Turn Off the Machines

Bugs have always menaced the technology world, but the emotional moment orchestrated by Gates lent a new philanthropic meaning to the challenge — one that would not be soon forgotten by his audience.

Whether you are observing an impassioned Gates or a new business prospect, understand that the human face is like a complex



map of emotional clues about a person. It is a simple truth that people respond more quickly to those they have met and demystified. Yet, what message is being conveyed when technology dependence can't be curbed during an opportunity to have a genuine conversation?

Shutting down or pausing our gadgetry may be a foreign concept in this day and age, but nonetheless it's a vital step to establishing a respectful relationship.

Say you're in the middle of a conversation with someone and the phone starts to ring, at which point the person turns away from you and starts a conversation on the phone. Or you're at a business dinner and your colleague starts to check e-mail. How does it make you feel – second best? Less important than the person on the phone or less interesting than the bit of information coming across the e-mail?

Business deals have been lost and friendships diminished due to these kinds of inadvertent insults.

## Multitasking: Holy Grail?

Most of us are guilty of doing two or more things at once, just to keep up. But bruised egos from slighted colleagues are only one risk we face.

While multitasking may be the holy grail of the modern workforce, David Meyer, professor of psychology at the University of Michigan, believes that no human being can effectively write an e-mail and talk on the phone at the same time. In a 2008 report in *The Sunday Times* (U.K.), Meyer asserted that both activities utilize the same language channel in the brain. Multitaskers rapidly switch

attention from one task to another, thereby reducing the intensity of attention to either task.

In addition, a UCLA study in 2006 found that multitaskers used a different, less conceptual part of the brain to learn a new task, resulting in lower recall and understanding of the task afterward.

## Communicate Personally and Efficiently


Even with a desire to conduct business conversations with greater authenticity, there is no avoiding the use of technology. However, marketing and communications executives should remind themselves that impersonal communication, such as e-mail or text, should be reserved for individuals with some level of existing familiarity.

Generally, use common courtesy and professionalism to make e-mail as friendly as possible. Remember that the computer has no tone, inflection or body language cues to shape the intent of the words. Be sure to answer others' messages in a timely manner and write succinctly with correct grammar and spelling.

RoAne suggests that if an e-mail takes more than five minutes to compose, it's time to pick up the phone. In a two-way conversation, you can solve a problem twice as fast. In both e-mail and on the phone, resist the urge to cut directly to the chase. Allow for some relationship building through small talk.

## Remember Watson

Effective communicators do more than share data, directions and information in e-mails or texts; they focus on sharing understanding and nurturing relationships.

Especially considering the ease with which we can reach out and touch someone, we need to remember that the most important element in business is the "Watson" behind the machine. 

## G&S Contact Information

*Cos Mallozzi*  
CEO

+1 212 697 2600  
cmallozzi@gibbs-soell.com

*Luke Lambert*  
President

+1 212 697 2600  
llambert@gibbs-soell.com

*New York*

Luke Lambert +1 212 697 2600  
llambert@gibbs-soell.com

*Chicago*

Doug Hampel +1 847 519 9150  
dhampel@gibbs-soell.com

*Raleigh*

Bob Bowman +1 919 870 5718  
bbowman@gibbs-soell.com

*Zurich*

Jill Allemang +41 (0) 44 205 5565  
j Allemang@gibbs-soell.com

*China*

Amanda Zhao +8610 6530 7783  
amanda\_zhao@inhere.com.cn

*Tokyo*

Rachel Barrow +81 3 5561 2915  
barrowr@cosmopr.co.jp

*Latin America*

Mayra Hernandez +1 954 730 7730  
mayra@bitnergoodman.com



GIBBS & SOELL

Your business  
is our *passion*.

www.gibbs-soell.com