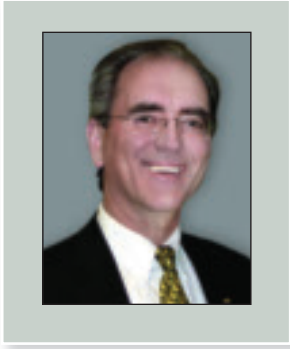


▶ MANAGING EDITOR'S DESK



Nelson Fabian, MS

“I’m either on the phone or away from my desk. But I really care about your call. Please leave a message. . . .”

If that boorish but all too pervasive message doesn’t put you off, how about the experience of getting lost in an automated message tree, or worse—a voice recognition system that only understands maybe a dozen words, making it all but impossible for you to get the help that you need?

The coup de grâce is the television commercial or the newspaper ad that shouts out that the very company that has just treated you in this heartless way “cherishes” its customers.

I was once so upset with this kind of robotic and time maddening treatment (it cost me over an hour of my time and never offered me an opportunity to resolve my problem) that I wrote two personal letters to the president of the Discover credit card company to complain about how impossible it was to get any help. To my astonishment, both letters came back unopened with a stamped message on the envelope to the effect that the president doesn’t accept letters!

Don’t get me wrong. I understand the need for businesses, governments, and certainly nonprofits like NEHA to cut costs and to be as cost-efficient as possible. We owe our members every effort to stretch their membership dollars as far as we can. Even when NEHA was absorbing significant financial losses two years ago, however, I refused to let go of our receptionist (as many of my colleagues were doing) even though such a move would have saved NEHA most of the personnel cost associated with that position. It is the “why” behind that decision that I thought you might be interested in hearing about, because it says

Conducting Business in a High Tech World or ... Why NEHA Still Has a Receptionist!

... people both seek and need a balance between the wonders that technology makes available and the spiritual demands of our human nature.

a lot about the kind of organization your association is.

To begin—I suspect that many NEHA members have read John Naisbitt’s best seller, *Megatrends*, which was published over 25 years ago. In that book, Naisbitt, a futurist, mapped out 10 “mega” trends that he believed were shaping the world. He named one of those trends “high tech/high touch.” (He looks back now and says that when he first wrote about this trend, it was truly a primitive beginning to what has become an incredibly powerful force in our world today.)

In explaining what he meant by high tech/high touch, he observed that the world was quickly adopting a wide variety of technologies (computers at work and at home, telecommunication systems, high-tech medical procedures, interactive databases, and so

forth) to facilitate work, health, and a broad assortment of personal interests. The more that we were coming to depend on technology, however, the more we were losing our contact with our humanity. In *Megatrends*, Naisbitt observed that to compensate for the loss of human contact that our growing indulgence with technology was causing, we were making extra efforts to seek out compensatory “high touch” experiences. According to Naisbitt, this life-affirming response to the increased presence of technology in our lives enabled us to still satisfy those basic social and human needs that people instinctively craved.

In short, what inspired his creation of the term “high tech/high touch” was the insight that people both seek and need a balance between the wonders that technology makes available and “the spiritual demands of our human nature” (to quote Naisbitt).

Since publishing his wildly popular book, Naisbitt has evolved his thinking in some extraordinary ways. His 21st century view on high tech/high touch is presented in his 1999 book of the same name (*High Tech High Touch: Technology and Our Search for Meaning*).

He observes that where we once thought of technology as something outside of ourselves, (a “thing” that did something for us), the concept of “technology” has now evolved to embrace how humanity itself becomes changed by technological advances. From this definition, Naisbitt argues in his recent book that in order to use technology to enhance the human experience and change humanity for the better, it is imperative that we honor our roles as custodians of the planet

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and as the conscience for technology and its use. (He rhetorically asks the age-old question, where are we taking technology or is it taking us?)

Naisbitt worries out loud about the unintended consequences of technology. He urges us to imagine consequences before we plug new technologies in. In other words, it is up to us to realize that using technology changes the very way we interact with others and even how we see the world. For example, a good friend of mine talks about how her kids now text her from the other room to find out when dinner will be ready. Knowing how profoundly technology can change the essence of who and what we are, he pleads that it is up to us to use technology responsibly so as not to degrade either our planet or our humanity through the darker sides (and uses) of these inventions.

While Naisbitt's warnings about the future are not the subject of this column, as long as I am commenting on his recent book, *High Tech High Touch*, I thought I might share a couple of the sobering points he makes. He notes that information technology has been hailed as one of the great revolutions of human history. When one thinks about it, though, this revolution really only helps us do what we already do, just much more quickly. In contrast, the genetic revolution that is currently unfolding gives us the tools to literally control our own evolution and even what it means to be human. Moreover, the convergence of revolutions in nanotechnology, robotics, and genetics is without any precedent. He notes that while these revolutions have enormous power to bring about change for the good, they can just as easily usher in change that could be catastrophic. Accordingly, from his vantage point as a social researcher and student of these trends, Naisbitt makes a compelling argument that high touch needs to inform this revolution with humane perspectives from the arts, theology, ethics, literature, and so on if these revolutions are to benefit humankind.

As I have followed the lessons that Naisbitt teaches while at the same time experiencing the frustration of trying to talk with automated answering systems, seeing the line be-

tween virtual and real become cloudier, and witnessing people tune others out in order to attend to their Blackberries, his thought-provoking idea of a high-tech and high-touch balance has struck a chord.

The high-tech tools we employ can be great assets for us. If in the process of using these powerful tools, however, we treat others in ways that are devoid of any meaningful human interaction (e.g., when we rage at voice recognition systems that only compound our problems), what have we really accomplished ... or should I say destroyed? We often hear that people are angry and frustrated. While the reasons for this state probably run the gamut, I'll bet that some of this anger and sense of isolation (when we can't get the help we need) stem from how much impersonal technology now substitutes for real human interaction in our lives. Looking at this from the other direction, isn't it a life-affirming experience to bring a problem to a person who makes the problem his/her own and ultimately helps you to get it resolved?! A huge and undeniable difference exists between talking to someone and trying to communicate with a machine.

A couple of months ago, I needed to "talk" to my phone carrier (AT&T) to insure that I had international service before I left the country. AT&T is a phone company, for crying out loud! Do you think that I could find a phone number to reach them? Instead, AT&T did everything that they could to drive inquiries to their Web site. When I finally did uncover a phone number, it took me into an automated message tree that kicked me out of the system a couple of times when I got caught in loops that were not of my making.

You can imagine what I was thinking and feeling as this torture continued. The fact of the matter is that AT&T doesn't want to be bothered, despite its war to win customers from other carriers.

It is little wonder that episodes like this become fodder for comedians and sitcoms. It's our high-touch way of expressing our shared and growing frustration with these high-tech debacles that are all too common in our lives.

NEHA is an institution. We too have to use high-tech products in order to be both competitive and effective in stretching our revenues, enhancing our infrastructure, and giving our employees the tools that they need to

do their jobs well. Yet we are also very mindful of the fact that we are an association—a people organization—whose entire reason for being is to be of service to a special community. That responsibility and ethic requires of us that we maintain a high-touch balance with our high-tech gadgets. This high-touch awareness has to be embedded in our psyche if we are to be of any real value in this high tech world.

Our receptionist, Laura Brister, does an outstanding job. We've made it very easy for someone to reach her when they call NEHA. But much more than that, she—and our other customer service staff, Cindy Dimmitt, Trisha Bramwell, and Misty Duran, under the leadership of Dawn Parks—strives to understand why someone has called and then makes it her personal mission to help them and to provide genuine assistance. I can't imagine not having a real person in her position! Providing a high-touch experience at this crucial interface between NEHA and its community is very deliberate on our part. It is illustrative of the value we attach to making your connection with us real.

As long as I am on the subject, I thought you might also find interesting that as I write this column, we are going through an exhaustive performance review exercise. As a part of that exercise, our employees had to prepare a paper that mapped how their work supported our intentions, among other things. I have to tell you that I couldn't have been more pleased to have seen that in the vast majority of these papers, our staff noted that a part of their job was to add a personal touch to the work that they did. I read numerous references about helping our members and demonstrating that we really and truly do care about them.

We realize how high tech can change our relationship with you. We also know that our actions can never resemble a laugh line on a TV show that parodies the exasperation that people experience when hitting dead ends with automated response systems or some other impersonal high-tech device. That is why you can count on NEHA to maintain its receptionist position and its awareness of the importance of "high touch" throughout our operation for years to come. 🐼

Jefferson E. Frazier