

**On Different Pages: How My Children and I Interact with Technology and btw*
Each Other**
(*btw = by the way)

There are daily reminders that my children and I approach life very differently. I like having dinner with warm (I'll even take not-so-warm) family conversation. They like a quick bite before they run off to their next "thing" (swimming? Starbucks with a friend? A group project? A date with their favorite TV show). They like conversation, but it is more often in the car than at the table.

Our differences in style and approach are particularly apparent when the subject is technology. Ironically, I don't consider myself a dinosaur. Computers are part of my life "24/7". I manage my calendar on a palm pilot. I read most of my news online. Yet the way we interact with technology is vastly different. We are on different pages.

Take the case of electronic communication where my kids mostly I.M., while I prefer email. When I instant message, I speak in sentences with few abbreviations. My children communicate in clipped jargon that could easily be considered a whole new language. My messages have many words, and exhibit a philosophy of focused, in-depth communication. Their messages are typically 10 words or less, all abbreviated, and can be described as "checking in". I might have 3 windows open at any one time. They may have a dozen. Their technique seems fractured to me. My technique seems dull and static to them.

So what if we are on "different pages" technologically speaking? I am on a different page than my mother who has never used a computer and is still learning how to use her VCR. My Mom finally got call-waiting to better manage her six children phoning in, but it is a 50-50 bet whether you will get hung up on when she takes the intercepting call. Me? I grew comfortable with call-waiting years ago and it is second nature. I don't panic. I finally figured out a certain graceful style so that I don't sound angry at the caller who, unbeknownst to him, is interrupting a current conversation. Different generations come at technology differently. So, where is the rub?

Back to the kids... There is little denying that technology has been a huge “assist” in most peoples lives, from the way we keep in touch to the way we pay bills. Still, technology has also been a source of friction, and not necessarily because we are fighting over computer access (my home has 7 PCs for 5 people). The friction stems from how we use computers. For example, a frequent source of irritation is the time it takes to “sign off” with friends when terminating a computer session. I will warn my kids, “We need to leave in 5 minutes.” They will say “fine,” but then forget to include the 10 minutes it will take to fully disengage from their on-line conversations. And the process can’t be rushed no matter how urgent the need. A sweet sign-off takes precedence over any urgent Doctor’s appointment. Often times, when we are finally on route to that time-sensitive appointment, we are all very irritable. Forget about chatting -- usually a driving parent’s pleasure. There is stone cold silence. Were I to speak (fortunately I know better), I would ask, “Why can’t you put computers in their proper place?” and they would grumble about leading such a rushed life that “I can’t even sign off with my friends without the pressure of hurrying up.” Now there’s the rub: the same circumstances seen through very different lenses create a source of tension.

There are other ways that technology inserts itself into a family’s dynamics. My husband and I are maybe old fashioned because we believe that homework should be done without the presence of music (with the possible exception of classical) or other distractions. This means: no IM’ing, no surfing the net, no downloading music onto an iPod, no videos in the background, no diversions from the work at hand. It also means no downloading Spark notes to shortcut reading the original text.

Teens see this situation very differently. To them, the iPod is a pleasant background experience that soothes and only enhances their productivity. And IMing? It is an *efficient* way to stay connected to their large universe of friends so that they can give the necessary time to homework and hobbies. For this generation, single minded focus feels unnatural. Multi-processing, dealing with multiple sensory streams of sound, video and text messaging is a natural way to do life. Their response to us may be as

simple as the Amtrak conductor's: "Get on board." In other words, different pages can be OK.

Of course these are only a few examples of how we as parents feel perplexed by our children's use of technology. There is the parent who recently complained to me that "I went downstairs to find my daughter online with her friends at 3 in the morning." Now this daughter is in high school, and we know about teens and their altered circadian rhythm. Still...who is she IMing? About what? And how will she feel the next day when she has to function at school?

I can't leave this topic without commenting on one of the most maddening aspects of computers in my home, and that is the trance it places on my children, so that a Richter-eight earthquake may likely go unnoticed. My 11 year old son's computer is adjacent to the kitchen. This allows me to keep a watchful eye on him. I should not, however, delude myself into thinking that I could actually talk to him while he is online. Any requests, such as "Take the cake out of the oven when you hear the buzzer go off" to "Remember to load your dishes when you've finished your snack," to "Call back Jake because he had a homework question," will most likely result in one burnt cake, dishes on the counter, and "Well, I didn't need to call back Jake because he connected with me on line." Now there is an idea for the ages -- IMing my son with reminders and seeing if I can penetrate the computer black hole.

Please email me with "Where's your rub?" when it comes to technology and the family and pass along any helpful hints you may have acquired at jebstein@sizedrightmktg.com