

A couple of years ago I wrote a column about my daughter Jenni who I thought had an incredible amount of text messages that showed up on our cell phone bill. I didn't understand how anyone could text that much. Texting was not something that I did, basically because I was too cheap to buy a texting package and because I failed to see the value that texting might bring to my life. There was no doubt in my mind that I could live without texting.

Normally I embrace new technology, but for some reason, maybe I am getting older, texting and internet access on my phone were something that just did not appeal to me. Don't get me wrong, I have had a cell phone since they were the size of a small suitcase. My wife and kids were sending thousands of text messages to their friends and to each other. 3,057 text messages from late August to late September to be exact. Granted, this number is down significantly from 10,600 that were sent and received almost two years ago, but the number is still significant to me.

But now I have joined the texting revolution, much to the surprise of a lot of people. The pressure to receive and answer text messages proved to be too much. Add to that pressure a more reasonable cost structure, and had run out of reasons to say no. But now that I have joined the millions of people who communicate, at least partially, by text, I had to figure out how to use this new found communication device.

Actually my cell phone has a full keyboard so I didn't have to learn how many times to press a certain key to make the letter I was looking for show up on the screen. I never would have had the patience to text that way. For some reason my phone only allows me 160 characters per text message so I have to be succinct in my writing, which is a very good thing.

I am also not an advocate of the popular texting language which shortens words to their phonetic basics, as I am afraid I will send the wrong message both literally and figuratively. With this new form of communication comes responsibility. Recently I got into a discussion with a group of friends about texting and socialization. Overall the group thought that instead of bringing us closer, texting was making our society, especially our kids more anti-social. Fewer face to face or even voice to voice conversations.

As owners and managers of small businesses we do not necessarily have to master all things technological in our companies. We cannot try to hide under the cover of being cheap or blind to see what the technology can do to improve our sales, make our staff more efficient or potentially reduce other costs. I sometimes communicate best through e-mail, while efficient, it is not always the best way to create or sustain the relationships necessary.

This week I suggest you take some time to put away the phone, the e-mail and the text messages and see some of your best customers face to face. Rekindle the relationship that brought you together in the first place. If you need to send a text or an e-mail to set up the meeting, that is probably ok. There is a place for texting in business and in our personal lives, we just can't let it be the only method of communication.

I don't think I will ever get to the level of texting of my kids or even my wife. Of all the text messages sent or received by our family last month, I accounted for a whopping 3.4% of the total. Not bad for someone with fat thumbs and who is still learning how to best use that technology.

*Small Business Today is a bi-weekly feature written by Tom Friedman, market president of First National Bank, Ames-Ankeny.*