

I am a little bit shy to admit it, but our cell phone plan has 10 phones. Both my wife and I have cell phones; each one of our five children have cell phones; our house phone, which used to be a land line, is a cell phone; and both of our sons in laws are on our plan. The good news is that each of our children and their spouses are responsible to pay us for their portion of the plan. The partial bad news is that some of our phones are Android and some are iPhones. Keep reading and you will understand why I say that.

Using the phones for normal conversations does not present a problem. Texting between the Android phones or between the iPhones does not present a problem. Texting one to one between any two of the phones is not a problem. Our problems begin when we send group texts between multiple types of phones. Well the problems are not sending the texts, it is responding to them.

For example, I will give you a little insight into my life. This is a series of texts between my youngest daughter Jenni and me: "Jenni at 7:47 AM: Mom is gone tonight, what do you guys want for supper? (I assume this text went to all three of the male members of our family, who are also the least likely to cook anything except frozen pizza.) Jenni at 7:48 AM: I need your requests. Jenni at 7:51 AM: Definitely! Just what should we eat? Jenni at 7:52 AM: Ohhhh crazy! Is it pretty there? I'd love to go to New Mexico. Me at 11:37 AM: I am heading to the grocery store after my lunch appointment, what do you want me to buy?"

Now to the casual observer, one might think that Jenni has either a split personality or the attention span of a goldfish. She has neither, but what she does have is an iPhone and something called "group chat". In addition to texting the male members of the family, she was apparently also texting our daughter Katie who was in the process of driving to Ankeny from California, obviously going through New Mexico very early in the morning. There was no mention from either one of them what Katie wanted for dinner. But using my deductive reasoning, I was pretty sure that Katie would not be in Ankeny in time for dinner that night.

My problem is that because I own an Android, and Katie and Jenni both own iPhones. I was not part of the conversation between Jenni and Katie, so seeing one small part of it made me scratch my chin in wonderment. Of course I could use my amazing powers of observation and deduction, and put the pieces of the conversation puzzle together, but our clients and potential clients should not have to do that.

When we talk to our customers and prospects, we need to make sure that we are on the same wavelength and using the same level of understanding. If not, it might seem like a comment about New Mexico suddenly appearing in a conversation regarding supper in Iowa. There is a fine line between talking down to someone and talking at their level. Some people are very natural at finding that line; others have to work on that skill. Gaining that understanding might spell the difference between success and failure.

Among the iPhone users, they claim they would never go back to an Android and the Android users would never switch to an iPhone. Personally, I am happy that we can at least be all together on one big happy plan.

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