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ADVERTISING



In-person communication still counts (big time) in today's "wired" world!

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Ask us. We're listening.

A late middle-aged man — apparently the boss — in slightly rumpled white business shirt and tie entered the conference room with a grim look on his face. Behind him, his assistant clutched tightly in her hand a stack of envelopes. As the two circled the perimeter of a large meeting table, at which were seated perhaps twenty men and women — apparently the sales force — the boss said sternly:

"People, I got a call today from an old friend. He fired us. Said he didn't know us anymore. Said we were all about conference calls and faxes and Fed-Exes. 'Seems like our relationship just isn't as important to you guys anymore,'" he told me.

As the boss moved around the room, reciting the bad news, and the assistant dispensed the envelopes one at a time, greeted by looks of alarm and dread from the team — "WHAT ARE THESE ENVELOPES ALL ABOUT???" their expressions seemed to say.

"Well, folks, we're going to make some changes," the boss told them. "Starting tomorrow, we are going to go see our customers. Face to face. Every single one of them. We're going to get to know them again."

It had become evident by that point in the little drama that the boss' assistant was handing out airline tickets.

As she and the boss rounded the table and headed for the door, one of the seated men swallowed hard and then challenged, "Hey, Frank, what will you be doing tomorrow?"

The boss held the last envelope aloft between forefinger and thumb, and said, without even looking back, "I'm going to meet with that old friend who just fired us."

It is, of course, a TV commercial, one from the '80s for United Airlines. And it was making the case for why, even in the era when business dialogue-from-afar had become so ingrained in our culture and economy, spending money on air



travel was a good business investment, moreso than ever.

That commercial aired before the days of the Internet and e-mail and the Web and video teleconferences and cell phones and fully globalized “business from afar.”

Today, we find the airline industry struggling to stay afloat. And you’d think, would you not, that the old commercial would be trotted back out, with perhaps an update in clothing, hair styles, conference room décor, music background, etc.?

Well, United never did deliver an update of that particular script so far as I can tell. But another airline did exactly that in 2004 (I am not able to prove whether they ever consciously worked to emulate the original, or instead just followed their own good business intuition).

Once again, it’s a conference room scene. There’s a Powerpoint presentation in progress, and a gaggle of hard-charging twenty- and thirty-somethings are gathered in “war room” venue to sleuth the bar charts, pondering how to “make the company’s numbers.” The speaker phone at table’s center emits jumbled voices of colleagues from other cities, who have “plugged into” the

visual presentation via the Web, and are involved only in part, from behind the buffer of their faceless “connection.” This time, no one’s been fired. At least not yet, that is. But there is disgruntlement because Jerry in Cincinnati is ten minutes late joining the call and his “stock” is falling, you’d have to say. The boss this time snorts, “we’re starting without him.”

But, alas, the door opens into the darkened conference room and who should walk in but Jerry from Cincinnati! In person, mind you, having just deplaned and cabled in from the airport. The colleagues are astonished. And the boss is mightily impressed at Jerry’s commitment to the cause — a fair-haired road warrior, descended from the sky, to press the flesh, and look folks in the eye. Jerry’s “stock” soars, in the way that is only possible in a story with 30 seconds of beginning, middle and end.

2004’s reinterpretation was by Southwest Airlines. The moral of this story (I guess we call it the “take-away” in today’s parlance) for both business and personal purposes: do not forget the power and the importance of in-person communication and salesmanship. Sometimes you just want and need to look your counterpart in the eye. He or she may be awaiting your visit.

This Riger article originally appeared in *Southern Tier Business News*.