

The Importance of (Actually) Talking to One Another, Every So Often

By: Brad Cunningham, City Attorney, Lexington, South Carolina

What a tremendous Annual Conference IMLA convened this past October in Niagara Falls, Ontario. Kudos to the entire staff for one of the best Conferences ever! As part of the event, we again gathered for the Sixth Annual Water Cooler Reunion on Monday evening at My Cousin Vinny's in Niagara Falls. Folks from a dozen states gathered around the table for excellent food and drink, and even better company and conversation.

One of the most popular topics was communication and how it has changed for this generation. We had discussed topics all year long in a virtual manner, but found no substitution for the tried and true old-fashioned face to face conversation. In two hours, we covered virtually a year's worth of happenings, coming and goings etc., in conversation that would probably have taken us almost all year to accomplish electronically. This is the great thing about the IMLA Mid-Year Seminar, Annual Conference and the corresponding reunions. You have the opportunity to engage in face to face communication without an electronic device.

Folks, I have come to the conclusion that verbal conversation is becoming a lost art.

We were really stricken by the way technology has changed society these days. My daughter recently registered for her first day of college, and was able to sign up online for classes in a matter of minutes. Technology has changed this dramatically from the four hour visit to the coliseum and handful of index cards that were required for me to register. (Larry Baer reports registering for class at K State with a chisel and stone).

As I spent the week in Canada, co-workers were able to text messages to me and email documents, which I could edit and send back in moments. Stark contrast to years past, when a week out of the office meant virtually no communication at all, other than the search for a pay phone, and a collect call to the office when we had time to manage one. A week away used to mean a week away. Now it merely means a week of non-physical presence. Thanks to functions such as "Remote Desktop," cell phones and email, some folks in the building didn't even know I was gone for the week – even the ones with whom I interacted. Lastly, I was not greeted with a giant mound of paperwork upon my return to Lexington, since I was able to put out fires along the way during my week "out of the office."

In our former lives, the method of communication seemed to be via letter, follow-up letter, and then phone call if it got really important and warranted the situation. The "MO" today appears to be social media/blog, email, and if it gets REALLY important, a direct text message. Actual verbal conversation is missing in the equation.

Be it for better or worse, this generation is learning to communicate without the art of letter writing or phone conversation, much less face to face interaction. I am reminded of the co-worker whose child was arranging a "study session" with another student in high school. The conversation went something like this: "Did you contact Johnny about the study session? ...Yes, I sent him an email three days ago ... Have you heard from him since? No, he didn't answer so I sent another email yesterday ... He didn't answer that one either, so I sent him a text this morning!" Turns out that Johnny's Ipad had some issues, and he didn't get the first two emails, but he did get the text message which was sent to his personal cellular communication device. (The word cell phone or phone was omitted intentionally, as a phone is something you use to talk on, or with which you make or amplify sound). But, the point is: verbal communication is completely out of the picture.

Another co-worker reports a conversation with children about watching their new TV. One child can't operate the remote, so concludes she will be unable to watch until dad comes around. (The power button and manual channel changer button go un-noticed) When they finally get to watch, another younger child disapproves of her older sibling's show selection. She approaches the TV, places a finger on the screen, and swipes the digit from side to side in an effort to change the channel despite her older sister.

Many folks today show very little need for a fax machine which serves no purpose in the scan and email age. They do not need to have a pen and paper ready to take a phone message. They don't know what a long distance card is, or a collect phone call. Many have never even seen a pay phone. For that matter, what is long distance? "You mean the phone was stuck to the wall and you couldn't move with it? How did you talk in the car?"

They will never experience the joy of connecting two cans together on either end of a string and passing along sounds. Or, the parental pangs of trying to locate a child by telephoning around to all their usual hangouts until hitting the right one.

In today's legal world, both parties to a real estate closing can walk away with a signed copy of the papers, without even meeting each other. One signs, then scans and emails to the other. In turn, the other party signs, scans and sends back a fully executed copy to the first party. Other parties collect the papers and keys, and you are all set.

And of course, through IMLA and the Listserve/Water Cooler, we can "meet"

and talk with our colleagues across the country and never leave the office. But, amid all this, does production increase via technology or is it more of a distraction?

Does technology always speed up the process or make it more efficient? How do you replicate tone of voice, inflection or body language into a virtual conversation? And if you make the social faux pas of sending something in all caps, how do you repair the damage of someone who has interpreted this as yelling and has been offended?

If your "network is down" in today's world, you can't read, watch TV, send letters or even make a phone call in many cases. Perhaps this is the virtual equivalent of solitary confinement? And since you have none of these available, you can't find out how long the outage will last. Where is that old telephone on the wall? How does it work without the Internet? How do I get my letter to Memphis if the Internet is down? Mail? A Stamp? Post office? What are those?

And, perhaps the biggest casualty for these folks (work wise) is the old fashioned job interview. Apply by email, answer questionnaire, email resume.... What? Interview? You mean I have to go talk to them? Do I show up in torn jeans and a T-shirt? Or sleep pants? How do I tie a tie? What is a tie?

You've got to love the advantages technology offers us. However, it seems keeping them in check would be a good practice. Let's not lose the art of face to face conversation. And, if there is a sick friend in the hospital, for heaven's sake don't send an email! If you can't personally go visit, make a phone call or even send a card. Email seems awfully cold and impersonal in such situations. Smiley face emoticons just can't cheer you up as much as a real smiling face!

The advantage of face to face conversation is no more evident than we experienced at the Water Cooler Reunion, and during the IMLA Convention. We can't do everything "virtually!" Thanks, IMLA.... We look forward to our next events, in DC in April and Houston in October.

AND NOW, FOR THE REST OF THE STORY (As Paul Harvey used to say) .... In the last issue of "Municipal Lawyer," you heard of all the interesting stories leading up to the Total Lunar Eclipse here in Lexington, South Carolina. You may recall we were in the center line of the eclipse, and had the longest period of totality on the East Coast.

Well, some numbers are in regarding the effect of the eclipse for this area. According to the State Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism (SCDPRT), more than 1.6 million visitors traveled to or within South Carolina to view the solar eclipse. That does not include foreign visitors, several of which I met here in Lexington. These visitors pumped $269 Million into the state's economy.

Many traveled from within South Carolina to another point in the state (such as Lexington) to get a better view of the eclipse. However, more than 800,000 visitors were from out of state. Most stayed overnight at least one night, and many shopped, dined and enjoyed the beaches or mountains while they were here.

SCDPRT reports that hotel occupancy statewide was up 50 percent compared to a typical third week in August, and park attendance was up 400 percent. The SCDPRT survey also showed most visitors viewed the eclipse in the metro areas of Greenville, Columbia or Charleston. Nearly half of out-of-state visitors indicated they went to an optimal viewing site like a park, mountain site or coast. About one fourth indicated participating in an organized solar eclipse event such as the one here in downtown Lexington.

The State Museum reports that it raked in $437,000 of merchandise sales in the four days of the "Eclipse Weekend" alone. The next Solar Eclipse in South Carolina will be in 2078. Officials are planning a time capsule commemorating the 2017 event, which would be opened in 2077 prior to the next event.

Obviously, the effect of the eclipse on the local governments was tremendous. In Lexington, we had virtually 100 percent hotel capacity and a tremendous amount of extra traffic on the roads. Effects were felt in the Police Department, Parks Department, Utilities Department, Finance Department, etc. You name it, and we were affected. I guess it was well worth it after all. I am sure other cities affected by this once-in-a-lifetime event feel the same way.

Recently, we had a bench trial in court for a speeding ticket. The defendant showed up, pled not guilty, and indicated she was ready to proceed. The prosecution put on a rock solid case including video. The defendant's entire defense was "I am a newspaper carrier. In my job, time is of the essence. I had no other choice. I had to speed to stay on time." "Anything further?" the Judge asked. A negative response..... Moments later, "Based upon the evidence presented, and since you have admitted to speeding, the Court finds you guilty." The response: "But sir, I'm a newspaper carrier!" The defendant never accepted the fact that newspapers carriers were subject to traffic laws just like everyone else. She left the court angry, nearly being held in contempt, and asking how to appeal...

The prosecution rests, your honor... ML

