



The Irony of the Cell Phone

By **Catherine Ellington, RDH, BS**

Being in my early 30s, I am in a unique and fortunate position. I am old enough to know what life was like before cell phones and the Internet, but young enough to appreciate the ways that technology has made my life easier.

Over the last 30 years, the world has gotten smaller through technological advances. Gone are the days of going to the library and employing the Dewey Decimal system for research papers. No longer do we consult the phone book to look up phone numbers and addresses. New music now streams directly from our computers instead of the local record store.

Every day the things that we considered essential to life are becoming more and more obsolete. In some respects, life was easier before the technological revolution turned our simple lives upside down. However, having tasted life without our modern technology, I realize that a technology-driven world is more efficient, effective and a lot more entertaining.

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In the next decade, the world is going to continue to change, and it will continue shrinking as technological advances bring us closer and get us there faster. For better or for worse, our windows to the world will likely be the two-inch screens of our smartphones. My own morning routine involves turning off my alarm clock, grabbing my cell phone and scrolling through the numerous messages that arrived in my sleep. With the touch of a few buttons, I can look at my schedule of patients for the day, skim my to-do list, browse the news, sports and weather, or simply send a message to my friends or family. All of this is done from the comfort of my bed and from a device that fits into the palm of my hand.

So many facets of our lives have been conveniently consolidated into that one tiny device. It is no wonder that we are always 'on the phone,' an observation that has caused great debate across the generational divides and sparked a considerable amount of discussion at the 2009 Unleashing Your Potential Weekend in Chicago. Where many of the older generation see cell phones as a frivolous convenience, most, if not all, of the younger generation see it as an essential tool for living life to the fullest.

Many of my contemporaries in both Generation X and Generation Y grew up watching our parents take the art of multitasking to new heights, balancing careers, family and friends to the best of their abilities, but often running out

of hours in the day for personal time. Through the use of modern technology, specifically our smartphones, we in the younger generations are able to continue the multitasking pursuits of our parents, but in a much more efficient way that actually increases productivity.

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"The advent of electronic communication has certainly changed how we handle both professional and personal communications," said Helena Gallant Tripp, RDH. "From the professional standpoint, having materials available on a Web site or by e-mail has minimized the lead time and expense needed to handle ADHA HOD/Council/Committee work. Materials are much more concise, precise and easier to handle. The ability to communicate 24/7, when convenient, has prompted more interaction and input from more individuals. As a committee chair, I often see an idea or request sent out to committee members, responses with questions or suggestions returned and final material approved within 48 hours. On a personal level, a quick e-mail note or forward of items of interest is always appreciated and keeps relationships active.

"I see younger colleagues responding completely by electronic methods. I had to learn to text if I wanted a response from one or two of them. I do not text very often, but it has been an invaluable method of communicating when time has been critical."

Just as e-mail and cell phones revolutionized the way we communicated in the 90s, modern social networking media applications have revolutionized the way we communicate today. Social media makes big companies small again. Suddenly, every CEO is just a tweet or a post away from any consumer. What was a faceless, corporate entity is suddenly a friend.

Web sites such as LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook and other social media venues provide limitless networking opportunities for both personal and professional growth. Never before has maintaining personal and professional relationships been so effortless and easy. It is no wonder that businesses everywhere are scrambling to embrace technology to advance their industries and improve their bottom lines. As an organization, it is imperative that we as practicing professionals do the same.

According to Suzanne Alford, creative director of Alford Advertising, very soon smartphones will be able to take advantage of the latest Augmented Reality technology through mobile applications.

"These fun apps show you what is around you by displaying real-time digital information on top of reality," she said. "For instance, you will be able to hold the camera of your phone in front of a building to determine who occupies that space and what products they sell or promote. You will even be able to virtually shop a store without going inside."

While the new, innovative uses of smartphones and social media technology may be intimidating to some, the cost of learning to use them is infinitely outweighed by the benefit of use. The applications for use in our profession are seemingly endless. Smartphones can be used to manage calendars, schedule visits or follow up with patients. As health care professionals, it is also necessary to monitor what our patients/clients are posting about our offices and companies online, too. Essentially, you are always in the office, even if you are on the beach in Jamaica.

Just as technology can improve our lives and our businesses, I believe that it can improve our organization. It is ironic that the same thing that has created the divide among the different generations of dental hygienists has the greatest potential to close the gap. Technology and social media not only enable the leaders of ADHA to deliver information to the members, but it also enables the leaders to receive information from its present and potential members. By embracing technology, ADHA is fostering an environment that is more attractive to tomorrow's generation of dental hygienists.

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"ADHA's presence on Facebook, MySpace and YouTube has opened a world of opportunities for creating connections in our community," said Ann Battrell, RDH, MS, ADHA's executive director. "Many of our members use these sites regularly anyway, independent of ADHA, so it's an easy way for us to help optimize the time they're spending online both socially and professionally.

"There is no going back, now—the association is going to be leveraging exciting new technology increasingly in the months and years to come, and we look forward to seeing the ways it will enhance the reality of the ADHA brand."

Closing the Gap

In the last few years, many of us have read articles on diversity and how different generations communicate. Simply put, diversity is the differences between individuals. The events and conditions each of us experience during our formative years help define who we are and how we view the world. These factors with which we grow up are just some of the influences on adult behavior. Our experiences and the environment around us shape how we think, behave and act. Each individual is a product of their generation and tends to flock to that with which they are comfortable.

When it comes to generational diversity in the workplace, however, it is important to recognize how the differences will impact personal competency in communication and management and promote teamwork.

"Although methods and timelines of communication have changed dramatically over the past several years, clear and effective communication is still an essential part of leadership—the aspect most important to convey to new leaders," Tripp said.

And while there are many differences between generations, there is one thing those from my generation all have in common: We are new to the profession of dental hygiene, new to the workplace and new to the business world. All of us are definitely in need of mentoring no matter how smart and confident we appear to be, and we respond to personal attention. And we prefer to work in groups, as we grew up working in team situations.

Even though social media enable us to continue to have our instant access to everything, our propensity for filling our schedules with so many activities has forced us to be a very structured generation. In order to manage the overabundance of activities, we have had to establish clear rules about our participation in them, one of which is staying cautious about long-term commitments. When we do make an open-ended commitment, one-on-one mentoring from those who have been involved before helps ease our sense of discomfort.

So the big question on everyone's mind is this: Why do those in the younger generation not hold office positions in their state and local associations? First, we have not been in the game long enough to run a meeting, review minutes or make the decisions that will affect our colleagues. Second, leadership does not mean we have to be president of our groups. We like to take baby steps.

Becoming an effective leader is not an overnight process. What matters most is what you do day after day over the long haul. The secret to leadership success is investing in your leadership development resulting in growth over time. Leaders are not born; they are made. The process of leadership is long and complicated, and it has many elements. Respect, honesty, focus, intra- and interpersonal skills, vision, emotional strength, opportunity, preparedness and experience are just some of the intangible elements that come into play when talking leadership.

Connecting the Two

Spanning the two generations has given me a unique advantage when communicating with different age groups. It is often said that we see the world through our own eyes. When it comes to effective communication, my friends and family now know I have a keen ability to read visual images and am naturally a visual communicator. I am more likely to respond to a request if it is given to me in writing, preferably e-mail. I use electronic to-do-lists rather than scraps of paper that get stuck in the lint trap of the dryer. With a photographic memory, I am more likely to retain that information if I see or read it.

When our cellular devices, programs and different forms of media are used correctly, they are highly effective. I realize, however, that important conversations cannot and should not happen via text or e-mail. Emotions cannot be seen or heard electronically. And lifelong decisions and life-changing events need to be discussed in person.

It is important that all of us remember that leadership is everywhere. Typically, my generation views our predecessors exhibiting an all-or-nothing role in our state, local and national associations. Taking a leadership position can be as simple as maintaining a Facebook page, taking registration at a meeting or placing a few phone calls to request gifts or donations.

After all, we are a very promising generation: We want to learn, we accept and appreciate diversity, we are team-oriented, we are confident in who we are, we believe in giving to others and we believe that life is always improving. All of these characteristics set the landscape for a very positive future. However, we should not pursue change just for the sake of changing, but rather to continue to build the next great generation.

Until we start respecting our differences and truly listening to each other, nothing will be accomplished. What separates communication and generational differences is how creatively and constructively the differences are managed.

And while there are many people in the world who continue to use smartphones, I will continue to remind myself that I am smarter than my phone. I communicate with my head and my heart, and I understand that any serious conversation should be face-to-face.

I am not expecting everyone to own or utilize a smartphone. But please do not expect me to not use mine! I have a lot to teach those out there who are not familiar with social media and smartphones. And when I put my phone down and turn it over, I still have a lot to learn.

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