

April 14, 2009



Larry Varnes.

*Larry Varnes is a graduate of California State University, Northridge, where he is now an adjunct professor of Marketing. He is the retired vice chairman of Grey Worldwide, a New York-based advertising agency.*

## Faceless commerce has some drawbacks

With technology exploding all around us to make our busy lives so much easier, are we moving toward a society in which we can transact our daily lives without ever coming face-to-face with another human being? Is human interaction becoming a skill of the past?

Already text messaging has surpassed cellular telephone usage. Somehow it's easier to use thumbs over vocal chords. The same phenomenon is happening to commerce. It is just too easy to order online and have deliveries magically appear at your door.

Society is undergoing a very fundamental transition that began decades ago when the neighborhood "Mom & Pop" store was first replaced by large retail chains that depended on increased volume with lower overhead. The movie "You've Got Mail" with Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan comes to mind where a mega chain bookstore is putting a small, independently owned bookstore out of business. This scenario has played out in real life across a wide range of product categories. Think about hardware stores, local meat markets and neighborhood clothing stores, to name but a few. Personal service and knowing the owner has become a thing of the past.

Then along comes technology. Technology allows consumers to find whatever they want, whenever they want it, and at the lowest price without ever talking to a human being. Technology is fundamentally changing the way we conduct business. Nearly every type of transaction can be completed over a faceless Internet. This brings consumers limitless choice. It's certainly easy, not to mention fast. But it's nearly always faceless.

For centuries people conducted commerce in person. We were able to ask questions, negotiate, touch and feel the merchandise. We actually got to talk with people. Today we use search engines to find the best virtual store where we make our purchase.

Following with the bookstore example, now even mega bookstores can sense trouble brewing. We can now order books online. Now it's the book that appears in the mail. And it won't be too long before we won't even need mail. The book will be electronically sent and downloaded onto our portable digital reader. Totally faceless commerce.

But is this all good? Through this transition, I fear unintended consequences will lead to a generation losing interpersonal skills. Sometimes it's just nice to be able to talk with a real person.