



The technology trap

Due to unexpected volume, we cannot take your call right now. Please try again later.

Those words were etched into my brain after spending several hours hitting the redial button, trying to preorder the iPhone 4.

Yes, I'm one of "those" people. This was after repeatedly (and simultaneously) trying to log into Apple's website to place an order. Neither the phone system nor the website was working — apparently overloaded by the sheer unexpected volume of calls.

I eventually was able to preorder my phone (and one for my wife), but it took a 10-minute walk and a 20-minute wait in line at a nearby AT&T store. That 30-minute investment in human contact accomplished what nearly five hours of labor-saving, efficiency-improving technology couldn't.

Simply put, no matter how advanced our tools become, there is no replacing face-to-face interaction.

Whether it's email, smart phones, social media, radio, television or some yet-to-be-invented form of technology that gives us greater access and insight into our customers' lives and buying patterns, nothing will surpass the value of a handshake, a smile and time spent in the presence of customers.

There are a number of challenges tied to the over-reliance on technology. No matter how good the tools, no one wants to live in a house built by untrained carpenters, plumbers and electricians overseen by an inexperienced contractor. Landscape contractors have access to the same materials. Why is it some

are able to charge more for their services? They've proven their employees have the knowledge, skills and tools to get the job done well. They make clients feel comfortable from start to finish. Technology becomes a seamless part of the experience.

If only Apple and AT&T learned that lesson. When I finally pre-ordered the phones, I was given tracking numbers, which I checked daily (I told you I was one of those people). I also was told I would be sent an email notification when our phones were available for pickup.

The tracking info indicated the phones arrived at the AT&T store on a Thursday. I stopped by the store, even though I hadn't received the email indicating I could pick them up. They weren't ready. I tried again the following day (even though I still hadn't received the "pick-up" email). This time they were ready, and I happily took the two gleaming gadgets home.

The first email — which I read on my new iPhone — came four days after my torturous wait ended. It read, in part:

We are working hard to fulfill your order as soon as possible. Due to the extraordinary demand for the iPhone, your order is not yet available for shipment. Reservations are processed in the order that they are received. Thank you for your patience.

Now, don't take this as a rant against technology. Clearly my obsession with the new iPhone shows I'm no technology hater. Most of the problems boil down to human error. Whether it's inexperience, lack of training or laziness, technology is only as effective as the person interfacing with it. In other words, make sure your people are trained — and don't allow them to use technology to replace human interaction. No matter how helpful gadgets become, they should never replace human interaction.

According to two recent emails I received, I might have two more devices ready for me sometime in the near future. Anyone out there looking for a couple of iPhones? Just call my automated line at 1-800...

