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KEEPING IT REAL

Let’s start at the finish: business can’t do business at a digital distance forever. And probably not for much longer.

We can go cashless, shop online, automate customer service and populate warehouses with robots. We can make phone calls, send emails, type texts and video chat all the live-long day. But—and this is likely going to be a call-to-arms for all the gadget geeks out there—there is no tech equivalent for human-to-human interaction.

As I’m writing this, I’m looking at a *Globe and Mail* op-ed with the provocative title-query: Has COVID-19 quietly killed Canadian Confederation? Equating protective travel bans with the balkanization of Canada, author Michael Bryant of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association asserts (ridiculously, in my opinion) that mobility rights trump public safety.

Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs, as well as all-too-uncommon common sense, tell you that physiological health is the most fundamental necessity of life. You must have heard the adage: if you don’t have your health, you have nothing. Guess what? It’s an adage for a reason. So yes, protection of public safety is indeed a greater priority than the freedom to travel... but just barely.

Mobility rights—the ability to move freely from place to place and from person to person, whether across town or across the country or even around the world—are essential to trade.

According to the Tourism Industry Association of Canada, the global tourism sector is worth more than a trillion dollars a year and produces one in every 12 jobs worldwide. In Canada alone, more than 170,000 business support the tourism industry. You can Google Earth the heck out of a destination, but virtual reality has no comparison to actual reality. A screen can’t deliver damp sand between your toes, or the smell of a Tuscan vineyard, or the experience of getting lost. You have to be there, in the moment, to really get it.

Human interaction isn’t just a tourism imperative. This year’s Top 50 CEOs represent vastly different industries ranging from food production to electrical generation to building construction to software solutions. Asked to identify the best professional development activity, they almost unanimously referenced some form of person-to-person communication. Ultimately, it’s all about networking. E-meets are great for follow-up, but they are never as effective as eye contact or body language when it comes to building that initial relationship.

I didn’t used to think that way. Pre-pandemic, I too would have sung the praises of technology and how it has increased the speed of commerce. Even in the disruptive days of March,

April and May when we were all scrambling to pivot to e-everything that would keep business moving, I was beyond grateful for virtual communications. I’ve since learned that artificial intelligence is the most incredible oxymoron.

Have you engaged with a “live chat” in recent weeks? Been “customer serviced” by an autoresponder? Unable to connect with a company because they’ve substituted contact information with social media links? I’ve had those “pleasures” far too many times of late and let me tell you, none of them compares to being able to ask a simple question and get a straight answer. But even as frustrating as that is, that still wasn’t what convinced me that digital is a platform in need of support.

I’ve spent the past six months canceling our Top 50 awards, then rescheduling, revising and scheduling again. We knew as far back as March there was a strong possibility we wouldn’t be able to host an in-person event. Everyone we talked to urged us to do whatever we could to keep it real—even if we had to scale back to a third of our regular program, with attendees seated in their work bubbles at tables six feet apart. While we ultimately did go virtual (we couldn’t risk a second wave and being canceled at the last minute), and even though we did everything we could to replicate the in-person experience, it just wasn’t the same.

Which brings us back to the beginning: business can’t do business at a digital distance forever. Personal safety still trumps mobility rights and will always be more important than corporate interests, but jobs, income and personal interactions are essential too. We need to find a way forward that protects all of the necessities of life. It’s not just about surviving, it’s about thriving.

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FEEDBACK

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