

Electronic Relationships for the Emotionally Bankrupt

With the average 401K balance currently within spitting distance of the price of a decaf mocha cappuccino, it's important to be able to count on the emotional support of your friends and family.

I've been spending a lot of time recently thinking about my friends, and I have come to the conclusion that...they are very time consuming. Time is money to those of us not yet retired, so I tend to think of personal relationships in terms of investment versus return, risk versus reward.

This type of clinical assessment is the result of either my BBA in Finance or the fact that I'm a self-absorbed jerk. I suspect the latter, because I tend to spend most of my time during interpersonal interactions fighting to overcome the Ptolemaic notion that the universe is orbiting around *me*.

This being the case, it's a wonder that I have any friends at all. It's a testament to my devious nature that I can restrain my relentless self-interest long enough to ask you your name, which I will have forgotten ten seconds later.

This is also why LuAnn and I have never had any kids – my analyses have never revealed a probable net gain. My mother once mentioned that the main reason she had kids was to take care of her in her old age, at which time I pointed out that God invented nursing homes for just such eventualities. As far as I know, she hasn't written me out of her will. Yet.

Last week I found the perfect relationship vehicle for emotionally shallow people like me, and as a result I'm no longer one of the few remaining souls in the civilized world that has not yet joined Facebook or one of the other online social networks. To be more precise, a survey last December by the Pew Internet Project revealed that 35% of Internet users in the U.S. aged 18 or over now belong to one.

If you're one of the other 65% still holding out, Ned Ludd (think Luddites), if he were still alive, would be praising your principles. After admonishing you for being on the Internet in the first place.

Having friends the old-fashioned way usually means sharing different small pieces of our lives with various people, depending on whether they are friends, family, acquaintances, colleagues or selfish jerks who won't let you get a word in edgewise. By creating "friend lists" in Facebook you can control what information can be viewed by members of which list – about 60% of users restrict access in some way.

What a time saver! Every time I update anything on my page, all of my Facebook friends to whom I have allowed access are instantly pinged (if I choose) with the information and invited to respond. No more time-consuming, manually-operated one-on-one relationships! I can maintain all the friends I want (the average user has 120) simultaneously while sitting in front of my computer in my underwear.

It's best to be careful about how much you reveal, though. Last Halloween, an intern at a bank reportedly e-mailed his boss claiming he needed the day off to make an emergency trip home to New York. The following day, his coworkers noticed that he had posted a picture of himself on Facebook wearing a fairy costume – a wand in one hand and a beer in the other (see the story at tinyurl.com/db9t20).

So far, my electronic interpersonal command center is working great. Now if someone could just figure out a way to raise children while sitting in front of our computers in our underwear...

Dave Parsons (fully dressed) sustains his 120 cyber-friends from his office at his business on the Coralville strip.