

Talk to Me

Putting the communication back in commerce

► **YESTERDAY, OSTENSIBLY BECAUSE I** had business to transact, I went to the bank.

Do you like the sound of that? “*Ostensibly!*” “*Business to transact!*” Between the adverb and the passive clause, I have evaded any responsibility for, or even awareness of, my own actions. The sentence is an almost perfect distillation of impersonal, mindless activity.

But the word “ostensibly” is also the trapdoor to a deeper truth: I actually went to the bank to roll back isolation, scatter distraction and communicate generously. Isn’t this part of what it means to “transact business”? “Commerce,” after all, shares a root with “communication.” I went to the bank to speak with another thinking individual, one who would ask questions and listen and nod and say certain magical words, such as: “Oh, that’s simple. Let me do that for you, and you’ll be all set.”

Where else do you hear such words? From online tech support? From your child’s math teacher? From your boss, from your employee, from the guy at the hardware megastore who sells you the assemble-it-yourself five-drawer unit with a mounted mirror?

Do you hear it from your physician? Well, good for you! Mine told me to contact a sleep center on the far side of town, which told me to contact my insurance company, which told me to contact my physician for paperwork. Then my employer changed insurance plans, and my physician retired. It wasn’t covered, anyway. If my physician had had the time, I would have told him a bit about my life, and explained that I was terribly stressed, and he would have prescribed a vacation rather than a sleep center. And I would’ve happily paid for the vacation myself.

But nobody has time to talk anymore, unless they’re talking to a computer, which everyone has time for. My physician was talking to a tablet for most of my appointment. “Why are you talking to a tablet?” I asked.

He looked up and smiled and



looked back down and grimaced and jabbed at the screen with the rubbery tip of his stylus.

“Because I’ve contracted with a data company to simplify my record keeping.”

He left to speak with the nurse. I heard her speaking—firmly, patiently: “Click ... menu ... accept ... code ... password ... tech support.”

I dressed slowly. I’d paid for my 10 minutes, after all.

We are in a strange place in American history: We are a self-reliant service economy. Most of us do not make things, or even do things, but rather contract with others, who proceed to make the process of having someone else do our things far more frustrating than doing them ourselves.

I have been playing phone-, email-, and text-tag for more than a year with a paving specialist who said he would fix my flagstone walkway. It would have been more pleasurable, in the meantime, to master the art of masonry myself. But I don’t have time to master the art of masonry; I’m too busy sending digital

photographs of my crumbling walkway to the mason.

In all this time, I’ve had one face-to-face interaction and two voice-to-voice telephone conversations with this gentleman. You might say that I should take my business elsewhere, but I am too fascinated by the phenomenon of noncommunicative communication. If I manage to cut through it, I will consider myself a champion of self-reliant consumerism.

Over the years, I’ve noticed that whenever I walk into the bank, three well-dressed people with clean desks ask me how I am feeling. My doctor never asks me how I am feeling. The bank folks seem to mean it, not like the restaurant hostess who asks the question with her back turned. On ordinary days, I lash myself to the mast, ignore these invitations and proceed to the teller. But yesterday, which was no ordinary day, I wondered: If I speak to the people at the clean desks, will they listen?

For nearly an hour I spoke. The person I spoke to listened. This was not just a bank; it was a spa! And then she said the words:

“Oh, that’s simple. Let me do that for you, and you’ll be all set.”

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Ask a Native

JAMES P. REZA

Las Vegas is in the desert. Why aren’t there more “desert-themed” resorts on the Strip?

Who wants to think of the desert when we are in a drought? Plausible deniability, baby! All jokes aside, Las Vegas has had plenty of desert-named (if not fully themed) properties over the years. They were particularly popular when desert escapism was romanticized in the era of post-war, mid-20th century optimism. Fittingly, that’s precisely when two isolated resort towns—Palm Springs and Las Vegas—came of age.

Early joints such as El Rancho (1941) and the Last Frontier (1942) launched the Strip with ranch-inspired names and cowboy themes. But with the exception of the Hacienda (1956), the ensuing decade saw the Strip shift mostly to the dreamy, desert-inspired idealism of the Desert Inn (1950), the Sahara and the Sands (both 1952) and the Dunes (1955), as well as the Aladdin (1966). Smaller properties continued the trend through the ‘60s, with such places as El Morocco, Algiers and Desert Rose helping to maintain a connection to our surrounding environment, at least in name.

None of them survived into 2015. In retrospect, it was properties such as the Flamingo (1946), the Riviera (1955), and the Tropicana (1957) that foreshadowed today’s Strip. Forget desert escapism; focus on tropical escapism! With the exception of the Luxor, it’s all lush islands, faraway cities and theme-less global “resortism” that drives the Boulevard now. We shouldn’t complain; Las Vegas always finds a way to keep the tourists feeding us. Besides, what we see on the Strip today we will surely not see tomorrow. And with the water situation what it is, who knows? A desert-themed property just might make sense again someday.

More Monte Cristos!

Ever since my two-column complaint about the near-disappearance of the famed Monte Cristo sandwich—*It’s breakfast! It’s lunch! It’s dessert!*—from Las Vegas coffee shops, many readers have written with memories and information, including Scott B. salivating over the Riviera’s “extremely tasty” 1970s version (“deep fried ... with a dusting of powdered sugar”), and Lisa K., who reports that Avenue Café at MGM currently serves one with avocado (“Blasphemy!”).

It seems all this Cristo chatter has prompted some spots to reintroduce them. This week I drooled over social media posts of Monte Cristos at Park on Fremont (Sunday brunch only) and Siegel’s 1941, a throwback 24-hour coffee shop that recently opened at El Cortez. I’m looking forward to indulging soon, pool season be damned!



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