



Sue Reitz

## Editorial

# THROUGH THE SILENCE AND NOISE

BY SUE REITZ

**THOSE OF YOU** who are parents know this is true. Kids rarely tell you what you want to know when you want to know it. There are times, of course, when it works out, when they tell you meaningful things: all the stuff that made today a great day, or their fears about a friendship that seems to be falling apart, or their opinions about god, politics or the Green Bay Packers. But that really doesn't happen as often as most of us would like. When you want to hear about their day, they'll tell you it was "fine" and then they'll wander off. When you want to relax with a glass of wine and a good book, they want you to listen to a play-by-play analysis of the video game they just finished playing. When you desperately want to know if their weekend plans include anything unsupervised or illegal, they're desperately trying to convince you that the friend's parents you can't seem to get hold of really will be around to monitor some cookie baking and Bambi videos.

When you think about it, communication is tricky. It's hard to believe it's possible to find meaningful information among all the silence and noise and deception flowing around you. And that's just what we're getting from our kids. When you add on all the other relationships we all have in our lives, with their varying levels of importance and closeness and trust, it should be overwhelming. But we're social beings and, actually, we're quite good at communication.

Really, I mean it. We tend to focus on the failures of communication, the times when it leads to conflict or misguided actions. But think about the number of times each day when you either give or receive information and realize that the vast majority of the time we manage to do it "good enough."

Most remarkably, we keep inventing new ways to share information with each other. Face-to-face communication just isn't enough for humanity. Starting with the invention of the alphabet and going on through the printing press, the newspaper, the telegraph, the telephone, the radio, the television, the Internet and text messaging we keep coming up with faster, more efficient ways of adding complexity to the whole communication cycle.

I remember, years ago, when I was an actuarial student, how eager I was to sign up for the new actuarial forum on CompuServe. I worked at a very small company, so I had high hopes that this new medium was going to allow me to learn from and absorb the wisdom of the vast actuarial community. What I found was that the online community was anything but vast and that the actuaries who were online seemed to want to talk about anything except actuarial stuff. There were lengthy discussions on beer, politics, sports and religion. But there was virtually no discussion on merits or lack of merits

of any of the actuarial issues of the time. I was disappointed, but did enjoy the forum as a place to hang out and socialize.

Over the years, through lack of time, I've become more of a bystander than a participant, in the online actuarial community. However, I'd still like to make an observation.

Discussion forums may not be a perfect communication medium—I can understand the reservations of those who are unwilling to spend time there. But what I'm seeing is that mixed in amongst the silence of the nonparticipants and the noise of the participants we're seeing meaningful discussions on the issues, challenges and opportunities facing our profession. **A**

---

**Sue Reitz, FSA, MAAA**, is assistant vice president for Illinois Mutual Life Insurance Co. She can be contacted at [smreitz@illinoismutual.com](mailto:smreitz@illinoismutual.com).