

Becoming a Zoom Jedi master

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced me to work at home, isolated in what I have started calling “the 64th Avenue Bunker.”

As a result, my family has gained a deeper understanding of my severe technological deficits. They commonly hear me uttering phrases like, “I just want it to work!”

I am not quite to the level of talking to my mouse pad, but I'm not too far away from it, either. Once, when I left my laptop at the airport security checkpoint, I called my wife and asked her to go collect it. “What kind is it?” she asked.

My answer, after a long pause: “It is black.” I would compare my technological journey to the Star Wars saga. To overcome obstacles and fulfill our destiny, we must adapt to circumstances and surroundings.

My home was like being stuck on the planet Dagobah, where Yoda trains Luke — a murky quagmire with bog-like conditions, fetid wetlands and no signs of technology.

Red Leader 5 of meetings

Zoom is one of the dozens of video conferencing services available to the public. By most accounts, it has risen to the top of the heap. It is simple, it is intuitive and most of all — it is free.

The new world made by COVID-19 forced me to learn Zoom — fast.

I went from palm-sweating initial meetings where I was truly lost, to leading 5–10 meetings a day on the business side. Zoom also gave me a new way to stay connected to family and friends, and conduct regular neighborhood happy hours. See Threepio? Meet Six-Pack-to-Go.

So secure am I now in my Zoom abilities that I openly deride colleagues who leave their video off or audio muted, and cannot understand why nobody listens to them.

I have placed my droid in back, got in my X-wing Starfighter, and led the attack on political Death Stars all over the state and nation.

Through this video portal, OAN successfully spearheaded the market map for the Nursery and Landscape Association Executives of North America (NLAE),

worked with coalitions made up of people from every part of the political spectrum, and co-convened a weekly nursery industry triage group with states and provinces.

A nation in isolation (planet Hoth-style) goes to the internet

It seems like a decade ago when the OAN Board last met in person on March 10. Seattle, Washington was in the news due to its developing cluster of COVID cases. By that Friday, March 13, most of the nation was closed. Social distancing became an historical marker for numerous generations.

We are a social society. On one hand, technology is destroying human interaction through cell phone text exchanges. On the other hand, it provides much-needed nourishment to a nation in isolation, thanks to video conferencing. If social distancing is the ice planet Hoth, where the rebels hid out in *The Empire Strikes Back*, then Zoom is the lightsaber that broke us free from the cave — or the tauntaun's belly that warmed us.

It was astounding that online video conferencing became super accessible to all generations, and was even adopted by them — even myself and my luddite Obi Wan Kenobi (aka, my father). But even more amazingly, the internet providers adopted a wartime footing and were able to maintain service during the most severe strain for access in memory.

This issue is all the more reason to make robust investments in rural broadband and clear away Federal Communication Commission barriers to all communities.

It is not a trap, Admiral Ackbar

“It's a trap!”

Admiral Ackbar had one of the most famous and quoted lines in *Return of the Jedi* when he realized the Empire was fully ready for the Rebels' supposed sneak attack on the second Death Star.

Many recovering technophobes have the same feeling about video conferencing. They're skeptical that it can be a long-term way to keep personal connections.

Friends, it is now a part of everyday life. COVID-19 is not going to be over by summer. Our industry and personal networks have adapted. However, if you are a nascent “Zoomer,” here are some rules of thumb.



Jeff Stone
OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

1) Do not underestimate the value of seeing people — even remotely. The connection between us is real, so embrace it.

2) Make lemonade out of lemons. The annual OAN lobbying trip to Washington, D.C. was canceled, so leaders got on Zoom with five of the seven members of the Oregon delegation and the rest are being scheduled.

3) Zoom is an efficient way to disseminate real-time information. We had leaders from the bankers and credit union associations provide a tutorial on federal aid packages. Meetings that normally would take weeks to schedule now take days.

4) Everyone is using this platform, so be aware. Zoom accounts are easy to set up and recently have wisely added a password for those you invite to enter. This is a good practice, because an open Zoom call can result in uninvited participants and content.

Return of the trade show

COVID-19 has turned the trade show circuit on its head. Mass gatherings of people are unlikely to be allowed anytime soon.

However, there are good reasons trade shows have been part of our industry ecosystem. No video feed can do an in-person nursery visit justice, duplicate the plant-buying experience at your local garden center, or deliver supplies to the industry or the public.

It is very possible that Trade Shows 2.0 may include a virtual component in addition to the traditional experience we all know. We shall see. I don't think trade shows have gone into the afterlife. They are not the force ghosts at the end of the *Return of the Jedi*. Rather, this is the dawn of a new normal. ☺