

MAKE YOURSELF HEARD



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Are there more effective ways of getting your employees' attention than e-mail?

by Frank Hoen

People are spending as much as 20 percent of their workday reading and responding to e-mail. For somebody who works an eight-hour day, that's more than an hour and a half just managing e-mail.

Walking around today's offices, it's almost inevitable that you see a personal computer on every desk. It's likely that every employee with a PC also has access to the Internet and e-mail. Executives walk around with their PDAs. Sales representatives are more productive on the road when they're armed with laptops and wireless access. Text messages abound. But while everybody gets excited about the latest digital devices and the ability to be in touch anywhere in the world, nobody seems to be giving much thought to the consequences of all this information.

The concept of information overload is becoming a real nightmare for many executives. People don't know how to switch off—or feel they can't—and so are always in touch, no matter what time of day or night. Not only can this overload have an effect on our mental and physical health—at least one

study has suggested that it contributes to conditions ranging from stress and irritability to heart problems and hypertension—it provides a significant challenge to internal communication teams that are trying to make their messages heard among the noise and electronic chatter that is today's digital mobile workplace.

Indeed, employees are fighting to gain control of their e-mail. Discussing the size of one's inbox and the number of unread e-mails it contains is becoming a new workplace sport. We are in the era of "reply all," where e-mail trails have become a primary means of sharing information, engaging and involving staff in projects, generating ideas and, dare I say it, covering backs. What's lacking is education about how to manage e-mail. In just a short time e-mail has become one of our most prevalent business tools, but very few of us know how to use it effectively.

Managers need to ask themselves whether their internal communications stand out from the myriad of communications that employees receive, and if not, what can they do about it?

The problem is significantly worse for employees who've been out of the office or who travel without ready e-mail access. Even after posting an "out of office" auto-response, the number of e-mails that need to be sorted through and, if necessary, acted on can be staggering. More often than not, information is ignored or misinterpreted purely because of the overload.

Connecting with the 'unconnected'

Not every employee has access to e-mail, especially those who work on the factory floor or the production line. Picanol Group, based in Belgium, is one company that has taken the concept of the screensaver and extended it to plasma screens located on the shop floor. Picanol, which produces high-quality weaving machines, uses Netpresenter screensaver technology to reach its "unconnected" employees.

"For the first time, we are able to keep the 1,500 employees at our Ypres location up-to-date with the latest company news and events via large flat screens across our factory floors," says Helena Verhamme, an internal communication specialist at Picanol. "We are now able to communicate with them quickly—for example, if there is an unexpected visit or an important guest in the factory."

The big advantage to using the screensaver technology is that almost everyone at Picanol sees it. "You always pass a screen in the factory, and the reaction of our employees is extremely positive," Verhamme says. "For those in the factory who don't have access to e-mail, they've become noticeably more enthusiastic. They feel more involved with each other and with the company. We have also seen more staff taking the initiative and sending in messages for publication on the screensaver. This technology is making a significant contribution to our internal communications."

—F.H.

Where does this leave internal communication? Any newspaper editor will tell you that there is a five-second window of opportunity for a headline to get a reader's attention. It has to stand out from the page and draw the reader in, making him think that if he reads on, he will find out something interesting that perhaps he wasn't aware of.

The same can be said of e-mail. Now that Microsoft Outlook users no longer need to open an e-mail to read it (thanks to the introduction of the auto-preview pane), the subject header and the first couple of lines have to do the same job as a newspaper headline. Unless you can attract the attention of the reader in the first five seconds, as a newspaper tries to, there's a significant danger that your e-mail will go unread or, worse, fall victim to a speed-read and then be sent into electronic oblivion.

Research undertaken by the ePolicy Institute in 2004 showed that for more than 10 percent of workplace e-mail users, spam accounts for as much as 50 percent of traffic. Of much greater concern, the same study showed that people are spending as much as 20 percent of their workday reading and responding to e-mail. For somebody who works an eight-hour day, that's more than an hour and a half just managing e-mail!

Spam, according to Wikipedia, is defined as "electronic junk mail," though it can refer to e-mail advertising for some product sent to a mailing list or newsgroup. I would argue that the definition of spam should be extended to all unsolicited mail. Yet how to define *unsolicited*? For many, being copied on e-mails that after several iterations are no longer relevant to them qualifies.

Filter technology is slowly being deployed to reduce the amount of spam that comes into organizations. But little is done to reduce the amount of internal spam that is being created by the "reply all" syndrome already discussed.

While many senior managers are well aware of the detrimental effects poor communication practices can have on an organization, they don't necessarily appreciate the problem sufficiently to want to do something about it. A study by CHA, a consultancy based in the U.K. that specializes in workplace communication, showed that 90 percent of those employees who are kept fully informed are motivated to deliver added value by being inclined to stay longer and work harder, and of those who are kept in the dark, almost 80 percent are not.

The question managers need to ask themselves is whether their internal communications stand out from the myriad of

communications that employees receive every day, and if not, what can they do about it?

The University of Twente in the Netherlands recently conducted its own study of the effectiveness of technology as a communication medium, comparing e-mail, corporate intranets, and a new technology, interactive screensavers, such as those offered by Netpresenter. One of the main conclusions was that employees wanted more direct, succinct corporate information, with freedom to access more content if needed.

While corporate intranets are well placed to deliver the substance and in-depth content employees require, they can't be relied upon as a day-to-day communication medium that lets employees know the top-line messages. It may be obvious, from what I've argued so far, that e-mail isn't necessarily the best medium either. However, screensavers showed promise, turning ordinary computer screens into an incredibly powerful tool to deliver rapid, eye-catching messages. According to the University of Twente study, which surveyed 695 employees at Eastman Chemicals, De Amersfoortse (Fortis) and the city of Breda, Netherlands, 80 percent of respondents said that screensavers made it easier for them to receive and absorb internal corporate

Building cohesive communication

When it came to converting its Halewood, England, factory in 2000 for the production of its X-TYPE cars, Jaguar decided to install a communication system for employees that could be used as effectively on the production lines as in the company's offices.

The criteria were simple: Jaguar was looking for a tool that would enable employees to get the latest company news quickly and easily, and that could be integrated easily with existing communication vehicles such as newsletters and management briefings. The answer was Netpresenter's interactive screensavers. As David Crisp, manager of employee communications and brand pride at Jaguar, says, "We liked the idea of being able to create screensavers that would communicate news in an easy-to-read and graphically attractive format on PCs in the production-line rest areas as well as on individuals' desks."

Today, Netpresenter is used across two Jaguar

sites (Halewood and the new corporate headquarters in Gaydon) as a means of keeping those employees up-to-date with what's happening in the company. "Jaguar employees take a huge amount of pride in the brand and the cars that they produce," says Crisp. "Using Netpresenter, we are able to show them what journalists and customers think of our cars through the latest reviews. They also know about our marketing and sales strategies, so they feel much more a part of the company."

Today, Jaguar is going through a further period of change with its closer integration with Land Rover, also owned by Ford Motor Co. The Halewood plant is also to go through another transformation, enabling it to produce the new Land Rover Freelander. Crisp expects Netpresenter to be central to communication as the two companies build on the success they've both achieved in their long and distinguished histories.

—F.H.

information, significantly improving their organization's internal communication.

Some big companies, including Volkswagen, Adecco, Sara Lee, Sony, Akzo Nobel and Barclays Bank, are starting to invest in this sort of screensaver technology as well, and report seeing a significant increase in the penetration and effectiveness of internal communication. Amsterdam's Schipol Airport, for example, has integrated the use of screensavers into its intranet, so when new pages are added, a headline is automatically generated and posted to the screensaver. If users are interested in the story, they can click on the headline

to link to the intranet to read more. The number of people who visit the Schipol Airport intranet site has increased by 50 percent since the implementation of this technology.

Of course, investing in technology is only one part of the story. Those compiling the content still need to be taught how to attract the readers' attention in the same way that newspapers use headlines. Any internal communication system is only as good as the content it communicates—and that has to be compelling and attractive enough that employees want to read it. ●

about the author

Frank Hoen is the founder and CEO of Netpresenter, a provider of interactive screensaver technology, in the Netherlands.