

DATA OVERLOAD

Tired of being bombarded by internal communications, staff at Clerical Medical chose to boycott it. Until a restructure led by Synopsis made information more relevant. Michele Witthaus reports

The benefits of keeping staff informed of corporate developments are widely recognised. But when employees receive so much information that they begin to ignore it, there is a problem.

This is the situation that Clerical Medical was faced with recently. Process consultant Jayne Mitchell says staff felt they were drowning in information. She says: "We used to get bulletins which ranged from 'everybody must know this' to product information. Everything people wanted to communicate went onto the bulletin board, which was part of the e-mail system. You had to go in and look through it all to find what applied to you."

For Angie Searle, a secretary in Clerical Medical's business support unit and to the EC programme manager, a great deal of the infor-

mation she received was simply irrelevant.

"Team meetings and things would be advertised on notice boards, but most of it was too business-oriented for me."

In contrast, the staff magazine seemed too strongly focused on employees' out-of-work activities.

Clerical Medical has almost 2,500 staff, about 1,800 of whom are based in Bristol at two sites. A further 200 are in the London office with several hundred more spread out internationally. Worried by the apathetic response to internal communications, the company conducted an internal audit to gauge the

feelings of staff regarding the information they received.

Head of corporate affairs Tony Bloomer says the research revealed that staff felt they were bombarded with information that did not apply to them. The company opted for a complete redesign involving the staff newsletter, the intranet, internal television and team meeting procedure.

"Our starting point was to place a section about internal communications in our annual staff opinion survey. We used that as the basis for developing the different communication vehicles. Then we pre-tested each vehicle and held group discussions with staff," says Bloomer.

Clerical Medical wanted to get people to understand the implications of corporate decisions and come up with ideas to move things forward' – Bill Quirke, Synopsis

Clerical Medical also sought external help with restructuring its face-to-face communications system, says Bloomer.

"We really want to get added value from the cascade team briefing processes that we call Connect. After going out to tender, we appointed Synopsis to help us with this element."

Synopsis director Bill Quirke comments: "A lot of internal communication tends to be about telling people what's going on. Our work is about how to get staff to deliver on their company's differentiation. Clerical Medical wanted to get people to understand the implications of corporate decisions, apply them to what they were doing locally and then come up with ideas to help move things forward."

When Synopsis was called in, ►

Clerical Medical displayed a model of communication suited to a stable organisation where there isn't much change or need to compete, says Quirke.

"The communication in such environments doesn't seek to engage people or get them to do anything. They had to come up with a model of communication that shifted

out of the Seventies mode into getting people to make the connection for themselves between corporate strategy and what they were doing locally. That was the missing link."

According to Quirke, the company was hampered by a hierarchical, top-down approach.

"Briefings did not explain why things were being done, whereas if you get groups interested it makes it harder for either side to nod politely and ignore the issues raised."

Synopsis prescribed a face-to-face communications process that travels in a loop around the organisation. A complementary training process was set up to help managers pass on key skills in this area.

Mitchell says the Connect sessions now offer useful information about how issues are being tackled.

"Before, we had department meetings where you were told things and even if you questioned them it didn't seem to filter through to the top and responses were rare. The new system gives a chance for more people to challenge what is going on and I think the company is becoming more forward-looking."

For Mitchell, the new developments have been positive.

"Previously, on the intranet, all you had was a headline from which to decide whether it was necessary for you to read the article in question. One of the major improvements that I have found with the new intranet is that I can set it to receive only the messages I think I ought to be targeted with, which saves time.

"I also read the new magazine, called Pulse. The previous magazine

had staff news, but did not tell you what was going on in the company. I read Pulse cover to cover now, and the articles tend to be more focused. Looking at the previous version of the magazine now is like going back to the Sixties."

Searle says that with the new communications methods, she now finds that even when she cannot contribute to a discussion because it is too technical, she can take in more worthwhile information.

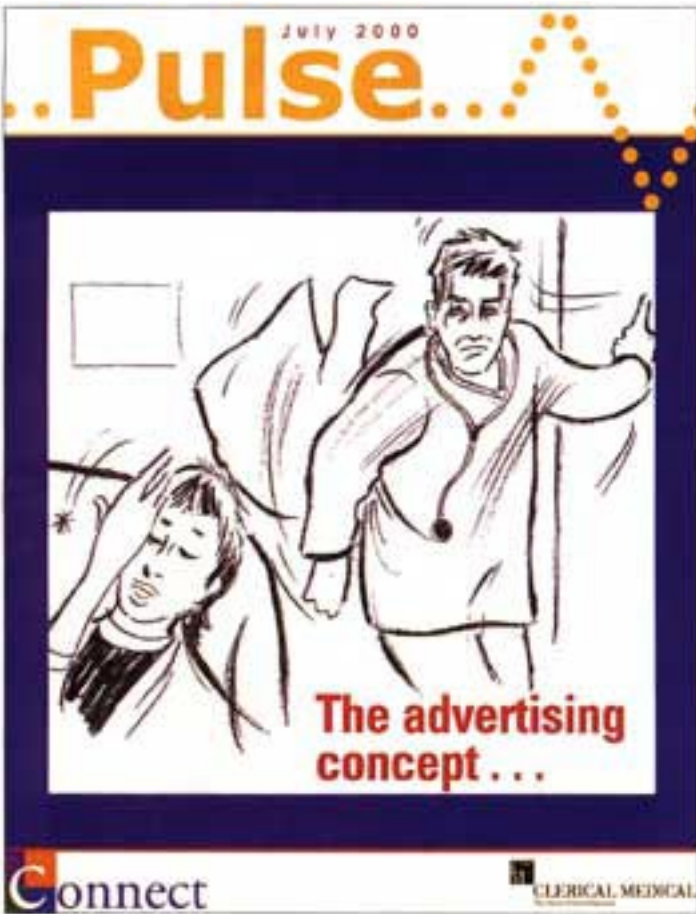
"There is only so much that we as secretaries can know, but I'm finding the Connect sessions and Pulse extremely useful. They keep me up-to-date so that I know what is going on."

Positive feedback

The initial results of the communications overhaul are favourable, says Bloomer.

"We have received good results from the first phase of our three-times-a-year tracking study, which surveys the different vehicles within the programme. The magazine element is particularly good with 93 per cent of people reading it, and 41 per cent saying they now file it, while 53 per cent consider it a useful source of corporate information."

As far as the entire communications restructure goes, only eight per cent of staff are negative about it, with two-thirds of staff feeling better informed. For a company which once wasted energy on communications that were filed in the office wastebasket, this is an important step forward.



Finger on the Pulse: Articles are now more up-to-date and focused



Team work: Since Clerical Medical's communication system restructure, staff challenge what is going on

