Encourage managers to put themselves in the shoes of the audience

THOUGHT LEADER: BILL QUIRKE

INFORMATION OVERLOAD OR MEANING UNDERLOAD?

Most communicators realize that messages need to be kept to a minimum in order for them to stay meaningful to employees. But here, Bill Quirke managing director of Synopsis says that the focus for achieving effective communication now needs to shift from decreasing the quantity of messages to increasing the quality of them.

Even the most intelligent of human beings has a limit to how much information they can receive, process and digest. So, with ever-increasing volumes of information, it’s hardly surprising that information overload in the workplace is now a common complaint. Professionals typically get 178 messages a day and corporate information is growing by 2 percent a month. People’s sense of being bombarded is worsened when what they get seems long, irrelevant and unclear.

Messages are meaningless
Employees are not simply facing information overload, but also meaning underload. They’re asking: What does this stuff mean, why am I getting it and what do I do as a result? The problem isn’t just that there’s so much information, but also that it makes so little sense.

The vast array of channels now at our disposal means that never has so much been communicated to so many, so often and had so little meaning.

Employees complain about not just the sheer quantity of what they’re receiving, but the poor quality. E-mails are sent where the main point is concealed in the fifth paragraph – so it takes longer to get to it. Slide packs of management speak are circulated without explanation and turgid briefing documents are forwarded to managers for communication in their team meetings.

Ill-thought-out messages are pumped out in the belief that an avid employee population will pay attention to them, internalize them, and translate them into meaning. In reality, too much is ignored, junked and mocked. This is an inevitable result of the “pumping station” approach to communication – focusing on sending out messages which are relevant to the sender, but lack meaning for the recipient.

Catering information to the end user
Since there’s a limit to the amount of employee time and attention, organizations have to choose the key things they want their people to know and understand. They can no longer afford to be “equal-opportunity messengers” where every would-be communicator gets a shot at the employees.

Instead of pushing high volumes of ill-prepared communication down the organization, communicators need to be tackling the problem at source, and raising the quality of the communication that their internal clients produce.

Communicators are often pressed by their internal clients – for example, senior managers – to push out information on their behalf. The quality of that information is usually low – it’s unclear why it’s being sent, what it’s actually trying to say and what the outcome is intended to be. Senior managers can often be poor at articulating their messages. Often they do not put themselves in the audiences’ shoes, express themselves in management speak and make things complicated rather than simple.

Businesses may say that they want their people to sing from the same song sheet, but they give them some very strange lyrics.

Communicators are increasingly working to coach their internal clients to cut through the clutter. Memorability, they tell their senior managers, is the key. With 70 percent of internal communication being informal, corridor conversations are more powerful than formal communication. So what gets remembered gets repeated, and what gets repeated gets reinforced.

Less is indeed more – the 30-second elevator speech gives more clarity, impact and explanation than the 73 PowerPoint slides which explain the strategy in excruciating detail.

How communicators can help
Communicators can help their internal clients crystallize their thinking, summarize the key points they want to get across and focus on what people will hear rather than what managers want to say. They can push managers to identify the “so what” that they want their audiences to take away. The end result of this is lower quantity, higher quality – managers will say less, say it more effectively and achieve greater impact.

Communicators have to shift from production to reduction – reducing the volume of communication, creating clearer meaning and adding greater value.

Communicators need to push on two pedals. First reduce the quantity of messages through better “air traffic control”, planning and clearer prioritization. Second, raise the quality of communication by coaching and equipping any would-be communicator so it’s easier for employees to make sense of the information they receive. If communicators operate only as post offices, employees are always going to be swamped in junk mail.

Bill is is managing director of Synopsis, a specialist internal communication consultancy whose clients include British Airways, Vodafone, Intel and Shell. A regular speaker internationally Quirke is the author of Making the Connections – Using internal communication to turn strategy into action and Communicating Corporate Change.