

## Blog archive

### Delivering the message

Managing poor performance is always something of a challenge. Managing staff and getting the best out of them, whilst maintaining their interest is a tricky path when you have to deliver some bad, or at least, unwelcome news.; for example a performance appraisal.

Japanese culture is a polite one. To avoid a cultural faux-pas, businessmen working in the orient, should be aware of important aspects of the eastern etiquette. When giving a Japanese friend, acquaintance or business colleague something, for example a business card, it should be handed to them, using both hands and so that the card is facing them and immediately readable. The importance of this cultural politeness must be awkward in the appraisal field. I recently heard of a member of Cabin Crew, working for a well known Japanese airline, who failed her SEP (annual qualification

examinations in Safety Equipment and Procedures). The trainer smiled, bowed low and told her with a broad smile "You have done very well done...but you failed".

The message was delivered, with some panache and with body language at odds with what was being said. Nonetheless there can be no doubt that the Cabin Crew member knew what the trainer wanted to say. Isn't that better than a manager who, having delayed cancelled and procrastinated giving the appraisal in the first place, delivers it awkwardly and without a clear direction, wanting to "stay friends" with their reportee and therefore not managing poor performance with any effect at all.

Posted by Russell Ison, 15/07/07

### What's in a number?

With the launch of the Boeing 787 and its rollout at Everett, Boeing's Seattle factory on 7/8/7 (see earlier blog), Boeing also celebrated the latest addition to their 7xx series of aircraft. Last Saturday the whole family landed at the Museum of Flight at Boeing Field. With careful timing the 707 arrived at 7.07pm, the 717 (the only product from McDonnell Douglas which Boeing continued to build after their takeover, originally the MD-95) at 7.17pm, a Boeing 727 at 7.27pm. Running out of appropriate times, the 767 landed at 8.07pm and the 777 at 8.17pm. All of which poses the question, what will Boeing move on to once, presumably, they have produced a Boeing 797 sometime in the future.

With thanks to Mike Alderson for the information.

Posted by Russell Ison, 14/07/07.

### Two nations divided by a common language

The USA and UK are gradually converging in customs, habits and even shopping. We used to be known as two nations divided by a common language but even that is becoming more common to us both. There used to be an excitement of shopping in say New York, the different shops and restaurants which we didn't have over here; Starbucks, Gap, Apple, TGI Fridays and now, the latest import to London's West End, Abercrombie and

Fitch. This young US upstart, famous for its preppie style and catalogues, has taken up residence on the corner of Saville Row. I am sure that the more established tailors in the area were a little surprised to find them pitched up in their area.

And the same is happening with our language. I have already made the point that the BBC has lapsed into calling television series "seasons". We are also now much more accustomed to the way the Americans write their dates (month first, date second, year last. The most famous of course being 9/11 - the 11th September rather than the 9th November. Most computers default to the US style first. You have to adjust your settings for the British style.

It is therefore not by accident that the Boeing Aircraft Company rolls out its new aircraft the Boeing 787 Dreamliner today - in American the date is 7/8/7.

The Dreamliner is the fastest selling commercial aircraft in history and you can find more information on their website.

We will see the 787 fairly soon, it enters commercial operation next year with All Nippon Airways, and will be seen in the UK soon afterwards with First Choice Airways/Thomsonfly (post merger) first and then Virgin Atlantic.

posted by Russell Ison, 7/8/7

Yet more changing faces

Following yesterday's comments about the way in which the police communicated in former times, I was reminded that the navy used alternative methods as well. Our

offices are at Gunwharf Quays, alongside the historic naval dockyard, home of HMS Victory, HMS Warrior and the Mary Rose. Whilst standing on Portsmouth Harbour railway station I have often looked at the new logo which is used by the visitor attraction end of the dockyards (shown above). The navy used a complex systems of flags, each one representing a different letter. Most school children who know the story of Nelson and HMS Victory will recall "Every Man Must do His Duty"; I am sure there are many souvenir tea towels which show the full message in flags.

It seems the navy have a history of complex communication systems. A year or so ago I went to the Southampton Boat Show and had a look around one of the navy's current frigates. In the communications room I noticed that the computers had different types of keyboard. What we take for granted, the QWERTY style, but also another with the letters in alphabetical order. The same guys use both keyboards simultaneously. That seems to be a skill they could do without having to have.

Back to the historic dockyard, the logo's flags spell out D-I-S-C-O-V-E-R. Go and discover the dockyard; it is well worth a visit, in particular the guides on HMS Victory. And not an aircraft in sight!

posted by Russell Ison, 2nd July 2007

The changing face of communication (again)

The conclusion of the current series of Doctor Who (and by the way it is not a season in this country, it's a series), got me thinking about the Tardis. Did you know that Tardis is an acronym for Time And Relative Dimension In Space? Yes I ought to get out more. The original plan was that the Tardis would change form to something which blended into the surroundings of wherever it found itself. But it went wrong on its first trip - to London - and never managed to change back. Two things are strange about this. Firstly the Time Lord who can resolve interplanetary disaster with the aid of a screwdriver has been unable to sort that one out. Secondly, these days it is strange to think of a police box blending in anywhere...apart from perhaps a Doctor Who convention.

The police box was a forerunner of police communication systems. Before personal radios, telex machines, fax machines, mobile telephones and so on, policemen (rarely women) could be summoned to receive a message from the box if the white light flashed at the top. It also enabled beat policemen to call in at regular times to prove that they were out and about where they should be. How different policing has to be these days.

The attack on Glasgow Airport reminds us of the importance of airport security. That extra few minutes waiting to get through airport security is for a reason. The presence of armed police officers at our airports is a sad necessity, but importantly enables us to carry on living our lives as normally as possible.

Communication in times of crisis is important. It gives reassurance that those being interviewed are in control and well briefed. Jacqui Smith, the new Home Secretary, gave an excellent statement to the press on arriving in Whitehall in the wake of the Glasgow Airport attack. To the point, accurate and telling us what we needed to hear (this is not political, it is an observation on her delivery and her message). Similarly Andy Trotter, Deputy Chief Constable of the British Transport Police, was applauded by the press following his briefing outside Charing Cross railway station, telling us of the way in which his force was addressing the change in security at railway stations.

Russell Ison, 1st July 2007

...but talk to us!

Last week I was complaining about the over-communication by Southern Trains, using too many recorded announcements on board their services.

Today it is the opposite. Too little communication by South West Trains. This morning there was major disruption to services around Fratton. Nothing new in that you might think. I ended up spending two hours on Platform 1 as the result of two trains breaking down. This is, I admit, nobody's fault in particular. Trains break down and I have no doubt from the flurry of activity by men in hi-viz jackets that everything was being done to repair and remove the offending locomotives.

The station staff were similarly doing everything that they could to provide information for the frustrated passengers but the inherent problem was that they didn't have any information themselves to pass on.

Somebody, somewhere must have had an idea of which trains were where, and when they might be expected at the station, which would have benefitted both staff and passengers alike.

I suppose that the purpose of this blog entry is to say that in all forms of communication there is a balance. Either too little or too much and the message is lost. Right message; right audience; right frequency; right time.

Oh, and if you work for South West Trains and want to defend your company please hit the new Post a comment or question link on the title bar of this entry. You'll be given a fair hearing!

Russell Ison, 27th June 2007

Join in the discussion

You can now join in the discussions on this page. We've made it easier for you to contribute. If anything we have said stirs something up in you and you have a burning comment, or just a question, for us, please click on the "Post a comment or question" link on the right of the title bars and this will take you to a simple form to complete. Hit submit and we will post your comment here.

Russell Ison, 26th June 2007

Please stop shouting at us!

HELP! Save me from public address announcements. I do not want to be greeted at a supermarket with a tannoy saying "Welcome to Sainsbury's Water Lane." I do not want to be told on the approach to, and departure from, every station on the train to Gatwick Airport "This is carriage number four of eight;" especially when I am forced into a supposedly "quiet carriage" because they are the only seats.

The more we get talked at by these automated announcements, the less we listen to them and therefore the more pointless they become.

Communication is a skill. Identify your audience and then construct your message with the appropriate words. Then deliver those words in a form which will achieve the greatest understanding by that audience.

Simple really. So Sainsbury's and Southern Trains spare us the noise. We are not listening!

Russell Ison, 26th June 2007

## The changing face of communication

The other day I was asked for my telephone number and before I had got past quoting the area code was interrupted and asked for my mobile number, the assumption being that I had one and I was more likely to be contactable on that (by the way, potential and existing customers, I am!). When last I moved house I did contemplate not having a landline at all but discovered that that other modern form of technology, Sky television, now relies on a BT style telephone line for its services.

Not so very long ago nearly every street had a telephone box, in fact the residential street in Kingston in which I once lived had one at each end. Nowadays, with the advent of mobile telephones, these once essential items of society have become a thing of the past... almost. There is one of the traditional ones still in use at Gunwharf Quays but just around the corner on The Hard, near HMS Warrior in Portsmouth there are two of the modern glass telephone boxes which have been recycled to new uses. One offers broadband internet access, the other is a cash machine. Whether you can use either to make a telephone call I couldn't tell you.

It is interesting how communication methods change. Where once no desk had a PC (in fact in my first job old fashioned memos had to be typed with carbon and a "flimsy" copy and we had one manual typewriter between six of us), now people complain that they can't do anything when the "computers go down". My mobile telephone has now been replaced entirely by a Blackberry (best invention since sliced bread), which combines phone, calendar, e-mail and address book. Will one day we run out of new inventions or is it infinite?

But with all these methods of communication, including the one through which you are reading this, other changes go alongside. With auto-correction on word processors and the growth of texting ("txt me") with its own form of patois, standards in education and knowledge of basic English grammar are falling. I remember spending a school break-time, at the age of six, indoors until I learnt the difference between to, too and two. Do any six year olds now know that difference (or for that matter the difference between now and know)?

Communication methods may change, but this is no excuse to let the standards English language slip.

Russell Ison, 17th June 2007

## Hampshire flying

Portsmouth boasts the only commercial hovercraft service in the United Kingdom, crossing the Solent between Clarence Pier at Southsea and Ryde on the Isle of Wight. As I thought that it was a dying mode of transport, I was surprised to discover that Hovertravel, the operator of the route, has just introduced a new vessel – a BHT130 type hovercraft named Solent Express.

Not only has Hovertravel introduced it, but their subsidiary company, Hoverwork, built it in their workshops on the Isle of Wight.

Until relatively recently, the regulation of hovercraft was the responsibility, in the UK, of the Civil Aviation Authority but has now reverted to the Department for Transport and is treated as a ship. This probably makes good sense since a hovercraft works with other ships on water and from a safety point of view should be treated as such. However, the CAA's historical involvement and the GH- prefix to its registration give a nod to the fact that as the vessel actually travels above the surface and therefore flies, making it an aircraft.

When I was small I had a Matchbox toy model of an SRN6 hovercraft. The full size craft was built by Westland, famous for its helicopters; in those days helicopters were new, exciting and innovative. Numerous crossings around the country and between the UK and mainland Europe employed hovercraft. Why have they not stayed popular?

Going back to the Isle of Wight, while Toulouse and Seattle are centres of aircraft manufacture, so too is the island. Britten-Norman build the Islander and Trislander the latter operated, amongst others by Aurigny, the Channel Islands airline to and from Southampton Airport.

In fact aviation was once a big industry on the Hampshire coast. We still have BAA's presence at Southampton and Manchester Airports Group at Bournemouth Airport (these days technically now in Dorset). Until 1959 BOAC operated from Berth 50 of Southampton Docks, then known as Southampton Maritime. British Airways had a pilot training school at Hamble until 1982 – the airfield there closing two years after BA pulled out. And of course Portsmouth proudly had its own airport at the northern end of the Eastern Road, now the Anchorage Park housing development. Following two air crashes on the same day, involving HS 748s, the airfield closed in 1973. Now all that remains of Portsmouth's aviation heritage is a few associated manufacturers and a road name, Airport Service Road.

But with the expected growth in aviation perhaps somebody will see an opportunity to develop another airport in the area...transatlantic flights from Bembridge IOW perhaps? Or the development of one of the MOD sites on Gosport. The traffic jams on the A32 coming out of Gosport might make air travel from the town viable!

Russell Ison, 17th June 2007

### Sign language

Having worked around airports for nearly twenty years, I have grown accustomed to the use of pictograms, these clever little diagrams which indicate to people of whatever nation and language certain pieces of information. In an airport for example, the diagram of an aircraft pointing slightly upwards moving away from the ground means departures. A man in a peaked cap with something resembling a Sam Browne belt next to an open suitcase means Customs. A small car means taxi, the lower case letter i means information and so on.

Most users of pictograms use broadly the same style, either in a small square or circle and all looking, if not the same, then of the same family. I was struck on a recent visit to Frimley Park Hospital in Camberley at their use of pictograms, which are of a completely different style. They centre around Lowry-esque stickmen including a neat one to indicate x-ray. The stickman has a square over his chest in which the colour is reversed, in this case then white on black, showing a skeletal chest (something I didn't know stickmen had!). Similarly the out-patients department is shown by stickmen on crutches and stickmen with bandaged heads standing next to a number of empty chairs.

Whatever final form pictograms take, they are a useful means of communicating a message to people who would otherwise not understand. Apparently a modern version employed by gap-year students is to take pictures on their mobile telephones of a bed, a cup of coffee, a lavatory, a train and so on and show these to the indigenous population to seek directions to places for which their foreign language skills do not stretch.

Another strange development in the world of pictograms is railway stations. In the not so good old days of letting the train take the strain, whilst getting greasy and cold from badly maintained rolling stock and being unable to get anything that vaguely resembled catering,

British Rail proudly had a logo. It was perhaps the only thing of which they were proud. These days the adjoining two-way white horizontal arrows on a red background is the only reminder of pre-privatisation and is now only used to direct people not already on a train to the railway station.

This is curious; would a foreigner recognise this symbol? Does it immediately suggest gare, bahnhof, or even railway station? Why not use a train symbol? There isn't an equivalent for bus station.

And so back to Frimley Park Hospital, the other clear pictogram in use outside the buildings is the white capital P on a blue background. Frimley Park is one NHS hospital that seems to have sorted out enough parking for everybody who needs it, and doesn't charge a fortune!

Russell Ison, 14th June 2007

### Swans' song

Birds fly without the use of big engines and thus are silent in flight, yes? Well no, actually. Just the other evening I was walking on some coastal ramparts and I turned to locate a fast approaching whining sound. A swan flew past me from left to right and as the birds beak was firmly closed as it passed it was clear the noise was coming from the huge wings as they forced their way through the air.

Now imagine standing on the approach path to an airport. Noisy, yes, but the majority of the noise you hear is coming from the air being forced around the huge shape of metal and composite flying by and not from the engines at all. Think of a windy day in a marina with the wind passing through the masts, the wind rustling the trees or the noise from a skipping rope as the child starts to go faster and faster. Like the swan the noise is created by nothing more than the air being displaced by a fast moving object,

Aircraft manufacturers know this bit of physics only too well and countless hours are spent in a wind tunnel testing new designs, trying to make the wings and body as smooth as possible, to create less nooks, crannies and holes that will channel air and thus create noise.

Recently, one manufacturer released tentative plane of a "silent" airliner. Using clever shapes to deflect the noise from the wings upwards away from the ground, in theory this plane could pass right overhead your position and you wouldn't hear a thing. But if you were above the same aircraft at the same time you would be able to hear it as the air was deflected upwards away from the ground.

Oh, and on the subject of aircraft noise we all know that the bigger the engine, the bigger the noise right? Wrong again! Most of the noise from jet engines comes from the hot exhaust gases that create the thrust being blasted into surrounding cold air as it leaves the engine. This creates the same rasping, crackling sound we hear from a jet fighter or older generation airliner.

The large diameter of modern jet engines on an airliner such as a Boeing 777 or Airbus A380 counter this by surrounding the hot gases from the engine with a column of cold air which is produced by the big fans. This shields the noise and makes the engine quieter.

And so, aircraft aren't the only flying beasts to disturb the peace and tranquillity of an evening walk on a coastal path. And, believe me when I tell you that the sound of the swan drowned out the sound of a jet approaching nearby Southampton Airport. But nobody minded either.

It also reminded me that while airports are ideally designed for aircraft to take off, swans have a lot more difficulty using them. On New Year's Day 2006, two swans landed on taxiway Romeo at Gatwick Airport. Unable to take off without water, the poor chaps were stranded there until help was brought in to take them off to a more suitable take-off strip. Being a nation of animal lovers nobody minded a slight delay.

Russell Ison, 14th June 2007

Will any dream do, or is it a matter of experience?

BBC Breakfast is my choice of early morning television but I have been wondering how they are going to fill their time with the impending conclusion of two of BBC's highest rating shows, discussion of which seems to fill much of Breakfast's airtime. I am referring, of course to The Apprentice and Any Dream Will Do, the former being Sir Alan Sugar's firing range for wannabe businessmen and the latter the search for the lead role of Andrew Lloyd Webber's west end musical Joseph.

Any Dream Will Do ended its run last night with the favourite, Lee Mead, winning. Lee was the favourite, in part, because he had been an understudy in the West End before entering the competition and his experience showed through, having had a proper apprenticeship in his trade.

His co-finalist's, Lewis and Keith, both spoke of this being their lifelong dream to be on the West End stage and, commendable it is to have a dream, gathering experience in treading the boards clearly paid off for Lee.

So the British voting public spoke, raising £500,000 for Children in Need and the Fame Academy bursary on the way, and voted for who they considered to be the better man for the job – the one with the experience.

Experience pays off; unrivalled experience is a valuable commodity. And if you have missed the point of this blog, watch the changing logo in the top left hand corner of this page.

Russell Ison, 10th June 2007

Inspiration from a church in a field.

Just to the east of the main Portsmouth to London railway line, between Rowlands Castle and Petersfield in Hampshire, lies a small cluster of houses and a couple of farms, forming

the hamlet of Idsworth. Across a field stands the church of St Hubert, a minute chapel dating back to 1053AD.

In the visitors book, people from all over the world who have stumbled across this simple stone building have left their comments, one of which reads "A peaceful place in a frenetic world."

Whatever your faith or even if you don't have one, churches are small havens in which you have the opportunity to reflect on the passing world and it was while visiting the church and reading that comment that I had just such a moment of reflection.

Our world is frenetic, but it is of our own making. We create the stresses and complications that cause this. We have the endless meetings, the twenty-four hour a day communications network which means we are always contactable and we over complicate the processes by which we live.

Following on from the previous blog entry, you can imagine the myriad of meetings, pitches, briefings, e-mails and telephone conferences that went into the finished London 2012 Olympics logo. The logo is itself complicated; it lacks the simple lines that present a simple message and that is something that anybody involved in communication should remember. The simpler the message, the more easily it is understood.

And so when next you are involved in a project think about the simple message, the simple lines and the clarity of understanding. The fewer the people involved, the easier it is to reach the objective of the project because there are less opinions to consider and less people to approve fewer amendments.

And if ever you are near Petersfield, take a small detour and visit Idsworth and draw on some inspiration from this pretty little church.

Russell Ison, 9th June 2007

Logos: An Olympic-sized discussion.

Whatever you may think of either the London 2012 Olympic logo, or the film which has famously been removed from the website, the issue has got the nation talking and raised interest in the London 2012 Olympic Games.

What is perhaps the most interesting part of the debate is the alternative logo which members of the public have suggested. A number of these have now been posted on media websites and published in the newspapers.

These days nearly everybody is, if not IT literate, then familiar with computers. So with a bit of help from Microsoft Paint or, for the slightly more ambitious Adobe Photoshop, some brilliant examples have been produced by members of the public at a cost considerably lower than the reported £400,000.

In a way this is an extension of the citizen journalism which has become a feature of modern news gathering. Viewers of the 24 hour news stations are implored to send in the pictures or video from their mobile telephones every time there is a major incident, whilst local

television news invites viewers to send in pictures. Now. With a little bit of creativity and a dash of IT ability, far better examples of a logo for the London games are being produced.

Logos are important to any business, as a graphical interpretation of the organisation's character. Like them or not, they also attract media attention for the business. What better coverage could British Airways have hoped for than Margaret Thatcher placing a folded handkerchief over a model of one of their aircraft to obscure their tail designs.

I am firmly in the camp that liked those tailfins; they achieved what British Airways wanted, to make "the world's favourite airline", as it was then, more international to reflect the vast numbers of foreign travellers that booked BA. It's a pity they gave in. But, by association, arch-rival Virgin Atlantic, never one to miss an opportunity, used the same debate to become "Britain's flag carrier", thus attracting vast quantities of column inches and air time minutes.

And so, whether you like the new logo or not, its got us all talking about the London Olympic Games...and there's another five years to go.

Russell Ison, 7th June 2007